Insights into the Ogiek Orature: first data emerging from an unpublished corpus[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the contribution that the study of oral tradition can make, both in terms of content and morphological and lexical features, to the reconstruction of the complex linguistic and historical development of remote areas of the world inhabited by hunter-gatherers (HG). The topic will be addressed using the example of an unpublished corpus of 23 stories, 7 songs and 2 riddles collected from the Ogiek of Mariashoni. The Ogiek are a group of semi-nomadic HGs with a delayed-return economy living surrounded by sedentary agricultural populations between the highlands and lowlands of the Mau Forest Escarpment in Kenya. For a more comprehensive perspective, the Ogiek corpus is here compared with a similar corpus of 16 Akie texts published in 2020 by König et al. Given the position of both the Ogiek and the Akie as *Dorobo* living in symbiosis with the Maasai tribes of the region, the data on Maasai oral tradition contained in Kipuri 1993 is also considered meaningful for comparison.

Keywords: *Oral literature; African folktales, Ogiek, Akie, Maasai*

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1. Introduction

The history of the various hunter-gatherer (from here on, HG) groups is still one of the least known moments of human history. Historical reconstructions are always a difficult undertaking, but they become even more difficult when there is a lack of credible documentary evidence such as chronicles, diaries or archaeological artefacts. This lack of material is particularly pronounced in regions where HG communities lived, such as in the forests of East and Central Africa.

Largely due to their ecological context and partly due to their reliance on simple technologies combined with the perishable nature of the materials they commonly used, that resulted not particularly attractive for their more technologically advanced neighboring societies, HG communities generally had limited interactions with surrounding populations. They were often regarded as parasites by pastoralist and agricultural sedentary societies and treated with suspicion and contempt by indigenous kingdoms, colonial administrators and post-independence governments.

Although it seems undisputed that the Ogiek as well as other *Dorobo*[2] tribes were the indigenous people of the region (see Bernstein 1976; Distefano 1990; Dundas 1908;

[1] This work, which This work, which is a largely expanded and revised version of the chapter "La tradizione orale come campo di ricerca utile allo studio della storia, della lingua e della cultura dei cacciatori raccoglitori. Un caso di studio africano" in Ligi, Tamisari, Bonifacio, Un accademico impaziente. *Studi in onore di Glauco Sanga*. p. 495-507, ALESSANDRIA: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2018, was realised in the framework of InALC, a project promoted by the Italian Ministry of University and Research and funded by the EU - Next Generation EU

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[2] The word is a derogatory term meaning "servants" that was, and still is, largely used by Maasai and Kikuyu to refer to all HG groups living in the area.

Huntingford 1929, 1931, 1972; Kenyatta 1990; Kratz 1980 and Micheli 2013, among others), the history of HG in Africa, particularly from their perspective, remains largely unexplored.

In such cases, the study of oral tradition can prove to be a useful tool. Traditional oral narratives, whether they report on the colonisation of the region or serve educational and recreational purposes, offer valuable insights for the reconstruction of historical and cultural narratives.

This view is shared by Kelly Askew, who writes in her preface to Kipuri 1993 (pp. ix-x) about the value of Maasai oral tradition for reconstructing their history:

> "The compilation of literary forms that Kipuri produced in this volume can thus serve not only as a repository of Maasai artistic creativity and worldview, but as evidence of their territories and claims to land. Newly discovered songs recorded in the 1980s, for instance by the famous ethnomusicologist Hugh Tracey who traveled from South Africa to record music of the Maasai, may held vital information on where they where located before experiencing eviction and political marginalization".

This article focuses on the Ogiek community of Mariashoni, who live in the Mau Forest in Kenya's Nakuru district. By examining their oral traditions, we aim to shed light on the potential of such an approach to uncover the rich history and culture of this hitherto unknown HG society.

The Ogiek of Mariashoni are a population consisting of a constellation of semi-nomadic clans embedded in a Kalenjin and partly in a Bantu context.

Unlike other HG groups, the Ogiek have a delayed-return economy (see Micheli 2013 and 2014 and Woodburn 1988). In addition to procuring food for immediate consumption they are also traditionally beekeepers, producing a surplus of honey that can be used in times of greater need. This historical practice has contributed to their need to move only at certain times of the year and in certain directions, in accordance with the migrations of bee swarms. In brief, it can be said that the Ogiek migrations were influenced by environmental factors and the foraging opportunities of various flowering plants between the highlands and lowlands that characterise the areas of the eastern Mau Forest Escarpment between Molo, Kiptunga town and Lake Nakuru.

In general, the older informants from Mariashoni told me that migrations took place about twice a year and have become increasingly rare over the last 40 years due to deforestation. This deforestation has led to the Mau Forest declining by about 70% since the 1970s.

The access and utilisation rights of the forest resources, especially in relation to honey harvesting activities, were clearly defined and the area was very precisely divided among the 7 different clans of Morisionig, as shown in the maps of Muchemi & Ehrensperger 2011: 60-74, according to the distribution of (natural or artificial) beehives belonging to each clan.

Living in such a culturally isolated environment seems to have kept the Ogiek of Mariashoni in a kind of closed niche for at least the last five centuries, only recently threatened by the pressures of a globalised world and an exploitative economy. However, beneath the surface of this apparent immobility may lie hidden facts, migrations, technologies, contacts between groups and languages that, on closer inspection, could shed light on past events that are crucial to a better understanding of the present and its nuances.

The Ogiek language is a Kalenjin language that belongs to the Southern Nilotic subgroup of the Eastern Sudanese branch of the Nilo-Saharan family and, as Micheli & Legère (2023) show, shares various structures with both Nandi and Akie. This suggests the idea of a Kalenjin language continuum that must have existed until about 400 years ago, when the Maasai settled in the region and probably split the Ogiek and Akie communities into two non-communicating subgroups (see Micheli & Legère 2023).

By examining the tropes, content and vocabulary of the Ogiek oral traditions and comparing our findings with those on Akie oral literature published by König et al. (2020), and with those on Maasai oral tradition published by Kipuri (1993), we attempt to make a contribution, albeit small, to elucidating their ecological and historical development.

The paper is organised in the following way:

- Section 2 is devoted to the presentation of an as yet unpublished Ogiek corpus collected by the author during two long expeditions to Kenya in 2013 and 2014.
- Section 3 reports on an analysis of the corpus aimed at understanding its significance for the reconstruction of historical facts.
- Section 4 contains a comparison between this corpus and the corpus of Akie texts published by König et al. in 2020.
- Section 5 is reserved for some concluding remarks.

2. The corpus

The corpus analysed consists of heterogeneous materials collected during two periods of fieldwork in the Mariashoni area in January and February 2013 and 2014.
It comprises:

- 7 songs recorded with a group of women aged between 22 and 68 years who are part of the volunteer group for the promotion and protection of Ogiek tangible and intangible culture promoted by MACODEV (Mariashoni Community Development), an organisation established with the support of NECOFA (Network for Ecofarming in Africa) and Mani Tese (an Italian NGO based in Milan).

- 23 stories were recorded with 9 storytellers aged between 40 and 80, including only three women, one of whom grew up in a Kipsigis[3] context. The storytellers come from 5 different places in the region: Mariashoni, Kaprop, Ndoswa, Kiptunga and Molem.

- 2 riddles recorded with the eldest woman of the Mariashoni community.

All materials were transcribed in the original language, using the International Phonetic Alphabet for transcription, as a phonological and grammatical description of the language had not been completed at this stage.

The translation was carried out with the help of a local interpreter, Catherine Chepkoech Salim, the daughter of the village head of Mariashoni. Catherine is a self-confident woman who has completed her studies and currently lives in the city of Nairobi.

The songs are mostly cheerful songs that are sung at festive and important occasions such as weddings, big hunts or the presentation of a newborn in the community. One of the most significant songs is part of the traditional heritage of semi-ritual songs sung by girls immediately after their circumcision when they are presented to the male

[3] Kipsigis are another people speaking a language belonging to the Kalenjin continuum, that is closely related to Ogiek and Nandi.

community (including those from non-Ogiek communities such as Maasai, Nandi, Kipsigis, etc.) who choose their brides from among them.

The content of the stories does not primarily concern the history of the settlement of the region or the recording of events considered significant by the community. The storytellers were free to tell the stories they considered most representative of their oral heritage. Thus, apart from only two mythological/historical accounts, all other texts are of a playful/educational nature. Interestingly, the Ogiek playful/educational stories have little in common with the better known African tradition of Bantu communities in East Africa and Akan communities in West Africa, where animals often play the leading role.

According to my corpus, Ogiek tales can be divided into four main groups as follows:

(a) *Narratives about the relationships between the Ogiek and the supernatural world*. In these tales, the figure of Tyemosit, who in Ogiek literature is a terrible ogre that lives in the forest and eats people, plays a very peculiar role. This figure is interesting in that it also appears in Akie folktales, where it takes on a completely different role and significance, as we will see in the next section. Ogres are also very present in Maasai stories, where they are usually called *nkukuuni* or *ng'wesi*, are equated with tricksters and often take the form of animals (Kipuri 1993: 21-27).

(b) *Stories, often ironic, about relations between the Ogiek and neighbouring peoples* (especially the Maasai);

c) *narratives about relations between the Ogiek themselves*;

d) *narratives about the relationships between the Ogiek and the animals*. In these stories, the animals are often very friendly to humans and usually help them out of difficult situations. The same happens in Akie and Maasai literature as it clearly emerges from the reading of the Akie and Maasai tales in König et al (2020) and Kipuri (1993).

In my unpublished Ogiek corpus, the only story in which the protagonists are animals with anthropomorphic features is a tale common to the Bantu heritage (text 16 "*Elephant and rabbit*"). I personally believe that it represents less of a true Bantu influence on the Ogiek oral tradition and more of a unique event. This is because the narrator was the only woman who grew up in a Kipsigis context and had an education. She was a former primary school teacher who wanted to recite a story that was probably in the textbooks, presenting it as a traditional Ogiek one. No other storyteller had ever heard this or similar stories.

There is a similar lack of Bantu-like animal stories in the Akie corpus, whereas this type of story seems to be quite common in the Maasai tradition (Kipuri 1993: 24.27), where, for example:

> "[…] Hare plays the role of primary trickster, a role she plays by manipulating all the big animals in turn. There are. nevertheless, several other animals that play the role of secondary tricksters. Mongoose, Chameleon and Tortoise are some of these. Of the dupes, Hyena stands out as a primary one, while Elephant and Lion are secondary foils. But as is evident from these narratives, many other animals are involved as foils, not smooch to portray their foolishness, but to highlight the ingenuity of the trickster."

As far as the two riddles completing the corpus are concerned, they are interesting compositions, especially with regard to their unique rhythmic and stylistic structure. This peculiarity could be an example of genuine indigenous oral creativity. Further research and the collection of more riddles could prove extremely productive and significant.

Although my Ogiek corpus differs significantly from the Akie one published by König at al. in 2020, a comparison between the two is nevertheless very interesting, as a number of similarities emerge that once again attest to the undeniable cultural proximity of the two groups, as discussed in § 4 below.

3. Analysis of the corpus and its results

The corpus was analysed with the following main research questions in mind:

1. How many different peoples are overtly mentioned in the corpus, and if they occur, are the episodes referring to them somehow datable?
2. How many loan words (individual words or word sequences) from different languages appear in the corpus? Which languages do they come from?
3. Does linguistic proximity go hand in hand with cultural proximity?

Regarding the first point, the analysis of the material has shown that there are 5 groups that are directly mentioned in the corpus: Kipchoik, Maasai, Kipsigis, Nandi and Kikuyu. The only ones mentioned more than once are the Maasai with 8 occurrences, while all others occur only once.

Although the ethnonym appears only once in the text, the Kipchoik, together with the Ogiek, are the protagonists of the entire third story, which we refer to as "*Puuni - Enemies*" together with the narrator[4]. In fact, according to this narrative, they are the most feared enemies of the Ogiek. This problem could almost go unnoticed, but the ethno-linguistic maps of the region do not mention any population with this name and the search for the reason is quite intriguing. Indeed, history teaches us that the words of our local interlocutors must always be taken seriously, even if they are to be savoured with a grain of salt. So there must be, or at least have been, a community distinct from the Ogiek, or perhaps simply the Ogiek of Mariashoni, who can be identified by this ethnonym and this community could probably be a clan of the Ogiek from another family.

If you stick to the framework provided by the Atlas of the ancestral territories of the Ogiek (Muchemi and Ehrensperger 2011), the name of the Gapshoi clan appears, which in turn is labelled Kapshoi on the maps and belongs to the Tyepkwerereg family. Looking at the Ogiek dialect variants, the prefix "*kip-*", which is typically used in the Mariashoni dialect to form ethnonyms, appears to be regularly replaced in the Tyepkwerereg variant by the prefix "*kap-*", which is also common in another Kalenjin language such as Nandi. In addition, the plural suffix *-(i)k*, where the final stop results voiced *(i)g*, is often realised with an aspirate in the Ogiek variant spoken in Mariashoni[5]. Therefore, it could be that what was recorded in the atlas as a final morpheme "*-oi*" is actually to be considered as an "*-oig^h*" with a final voiced and then aspirate stop. At this point, based on the form of the word, it could be plausible that our Kapshoi, becomes "*Kipchoig^h*" when pronounced in the Mariashoni dialect variant. From this, one could conclude that the most feared enemies, namely the populations with whom the Mariashoni Ogiek have had (and still have?) the bloodiest conflicts, are in fact clans similar to them, belonging to other families, with whom the bonds of solidarity and reciprocity within the Morisionig family do not apply, unless they have to unite against an external invader that threatens both macro-groups. All this would correspond exactly

[4] It is important to underline here that the term *puuni*, that for the Ogiek corresponds to the English enemies, is for the Akie, as reported in König et al. (2020), the ethnonym for Maasai and seems to have no negative implication.
[5] See Micheli 2016: 76 for the spirantization of final stops in the Ogiek of Mariashoni. For the spirantization of stops in Nandi, another Kalenjin language, see Creider & Creider 1989:13.

to what classical anthropology teaches about the relationships within populations composed of different clans, each divided into precise lineages, and presents a very plausible picture of the internal balances within the three Ogiek families, considered as a unified people.

The Maasai appear in 3 different stories, in which both bloody and humorous episodes are told. In these accounts the Ogiek, although poorer and worse armed, skillfully outmanoeuvre their richer but less intelligent opponents.

The Maasai are also mentioned indirectly in one of the songs sung during the ceremony in which the circumcised girls are presented to the interested male community. The song speaks of "strangers" who are attracted by the girls' beauty, hinting at alliances for future economic and political relations.

Specifically, the narrator mentions in text 2 "*Description of the Tyemosit*" that the "*Tyemosit*", the ogre living in the forest, deceives the Ogiek by assuming the appearance of a Maasai.

In story 7 "*How could they kill a Tyemosit*", the narrator mentions instead that the Maasai were the Ogiek's historical neighbours long before other peoples invaded the Mau Forest region.

In story 15 "*Tyepkereriòt*", in which the ethnonym Maasai appears 6 times, the narrator recounts a specific and exemplary episode in which there are repeated clashes between a group of Maasai invaders and the brave Ogiek warrior *Tyepkereriòt*. There was a time when the Ogiek and the Maasai lived as neighbours, each inhabiting their own space and maintaining peaceful relations with each other. One day, however, the Maasai made a night raid on the Ogiek territory and killed most of the men who were keeping watch by catching them sleeping under the trees outside the camp. *Tyepkereriòt*, the son of one of the Ogiek killed that night, took revenge the next day. He killed all the Maasai men he encountered and continued his vendetta in the days that followed. The Maasai were unable to prevent or stop the bloodshed until finally Maasai women approached *Tyepkereriòt* and pleaded for peace and a ceasefire on behalf of their people. They assured him that such an attack, which had triggered such violence, would not happen again. *Tyepkereriòt* accepted the women's apology and the violence stopped.

In story 7 "*How could they kill a Tyemosit*", Nandi, Kipsigis and Kikuyu as well as Asians and white men are mentioned only once. It is said that the Ogiek and the *Tyemosit* had not yet entered the Mariashoni region at the time of the events narrated. Although this information is undated, it is of crucial importance for the settlement history of the region. The fact that the Maasai are not mentioned in this context suggests that the exchange and coexistence between the Ogiek and the Maasai was not only real but also primary, at least in terms of relevance compared to all other relationships with other groups currently settling in the same area and who are considered intruders, just like Asians or whites.

Specifically, the narrator mentions Nandi and Kipsigis while describing the context and stating that at the time of the events, "*There were no houses made of straw, houses made of straw were not for the Okiek. Houses made of thatch came from the Nandi and Kipsigis areas. There we had houses made of bamboo leaves in which we slept*"[6]. The

[6] The following phonetic transcription does not take into consideration vowel length and tones:
[*Kímangetin koorig ak susueg; koorig ak susueg kógimaŋɔ bɔ Okiek*].
VP (remote past marker - neg. - 1st pers. pl. = Vstem) - Subject NP (N - prep - noun); Subject NP (N - prep - N) - VP (impers. - remote past marker - neg. - loc) - NP (prep + N).

Kikuyu are mentioned later in the story: "*we had no schools, we didn't know anyone like the Kikuyu, these Kipsigis, Whites, Asians, someone who were our neighbours were the Maasai*"[7].

None of the events referred to in the texts can be dated more precisely than mentioned above.

On the second point, the borrowings recorded in the corpus are indeed few, apart from the fact that three of the 23 stories were so heavily influenced by Kipsigis that the translator was forced to make a genuine translation of the content from Kipsigis to Ogiek before transcribing.

The number of borrowings can be summarised as follows:

32 from Kipsigis;
24 from Kiswahili;
2 from English;
2 of unknown origin.

Since both the borrowings from Swahili and those from English do not really have a corresponding translation in Ogiek and mostly consist of compound structures or refer to objects or words that are foreign to Ogiek, such as numbers above 10 or even ideophones they are not considered.

The following table shows, indeed, only the comparison between the Kipsigis expressions used by the narrators and those that would have been corrected in Ogiek:

We did not have - houses of straw; houses of straw - were not there - for Ogiek

[*Koorig ag susueg kógi ɪjobun emɛt ak Nandisie ak Kipsigise*]
Subject NP (N + prep + noun) - VP (loc - middle past marker > to be) - loc. adv./foc. - NP (N + prep +N + prep + N)
Houses of straw - were - right there - lands of Nandi, of Kispigis

[*Ko echɛg kógi koorig ak teeleg, négi kirugwe*]
Foc - Subject pron. - VP (loc - middle past marker > to be) - NP (N - prep - N) - relative pron./foc. - VP (1st pers. pl. remote past marker =Vstem)
! - we - there were - houses of bamboo - in those - we slept

[7] The following phonetic transcription does not take into consideration vowel length and tones:

[*màkétìn sugul*]
VP (Neg. - 1pers. pl. present marker = Vstem) - NP (N)
We do not have - school

[*màngénen chi(tɔi) ak ɛmet os (ak?) kógojotie, kipsigisindoni, chumìndoni, mòendioní*]
VP (Neg. 1st pers. pl. present marker = Vstem) - Subj. NP (N - prep - N - locative derivative 3x)
We do not know - men - of lands - of kikuyu, of Kipsigis, of Whites, of Asians

[*chitɔ(i) négibò kónyòn kógi mòsòɪndèt*]
N - relative pron. + foc - VP (1st pers. pl. present marker = Vstem) - VP (loc - middle past marker > to be) - Subject
People - who - we know - (they) are - Maasai

Meaning	Kipsigis	Ogiek	notes
Tale	ɔtındıɔn	tɔnguch	2 occurrences
And he came down, put, went and ran away	akórig, akóroch, akógwo, akálabat	iskórig, iskóroch, iskógwo, iskálabat	There are 4 occurrences of morphological loan. The actual valence of the prefix is still to be understood, although in general, it seems to indicate purpose or repetitiveness (cf. the Akie form kosi, si o si ko in König et al. 2015:108-109).
Reached	kábɔchit	káitis	
Trap	tegereriot	/	The translator does not know the Ogiek correspondent term
He hid	kósop	kóyup	
Back	parag	patai	
Ideophone - eh…!	ingunon / inguni / tun any	paanan / paani	3 occurrences
He stood up	kínget	kígɔs	3 occurrences
Don't kill me!	mòtibarab	maibaran	Morphological loan - the prefix "mà-" is common in Akie (König et al. 2015: 63-64) and Nandi (Creider&Creider 1969).
Give me!	putwɔn	kóónɔn	
People	pèèg	piig	
Young girl	chebkeleliot	murèrèt	In reality, the correct term in Ogiek for "young girl" would be "chebtɔ"; "murɛrɛt" is in fact the bride.
Gentle	(káá)raran	singwɔı	
Forest	ɔsnɛt	tımdɔ / èmɛt	

Ideophone - so much for…, ion a while	puch	kolen	
Over there	kóómosin	pataain	
Breast?	gèbèèt	?	Uncertain loan
That one/that man	ingo	age	Personal pronoun
They closed their eyes	kérurej	kémugut	
The others / those	ichochug	chug	Personal pronoun
They gathered fruits	kóchurugu	kóchorogu	
Let's run!	kéruaj	kélɔbɔt(ɪ)	(ɪ) would be an imperfective suffix
Those kind of things…	kíí ne bɔrɔnʊ	Mwɔɪtɔgɔ	
He climbed up	kónyar	kólangda	
Servant	sèètat	tʊrɔt	
Focus particle	inoni	nigo	
And he didn't come back	amakwek	amaijej	In this case, the loan is lexical, while the negation morpheme is typically Ogiek with the vowel "a".
Bows	doj	nyij	

The comparison between the two columns in the table shows that the two languages; Ogiek and Kipsigis, are clearly related from a morphological point of view (see the conjugated verbs) and that the translator was able to disambiguate the translation without too many problems even in front of lexical borrowings. Only in two cases the translator remained uncertain and could not find an adequate equivalent in Ogiek.

The lexicographical and morphological analysis of the corpus, allows us to state with absolute certainty that both Ogiek and Kipsigis are closely related to Nandi, as described by Creider & Creider in 1989. As amply detailed in Micheli (2020) and Micheli and Legère (2023), the morphological similarity of these languages within the Kalenjin family can easily be applied, albeit with varying degrees of similarity, to the Akie spoken in Tanzania as described by König et al. (2015) and to Pokoot and Tugen as documented, albeit not exhaustively, by Kamuren (2011).

From a lexical point of view, the correspondence seems to be significantly less evident, especially between Ogiek and languages such as Pokoot, Tugen and Akie, while it seems to be more important between Ogiek and Nandi or Kipsigis, which is quite understandable given the geographical proximity between the three communities on Kenyan territory. This is neither the opportunity nor the place for a comparative study, which would require a much larger space and more extensive documentary material, but

it is obvious that systematic research in this direction could be very productive in reconstructing a more accurate and detailed ethno-linguistic picture of this region.
Also important in this context is the fact that although the Ogiek have always had a symbiotic relationship with the Maasai, from a linguistic point of view, i.e. in terms of morphological and lexical aspects, there are no similarities and above all no lexical borrowings from Maasai to Ogiek, at least not in the corpus that constitutes the object of this study.

These considerations lead us directly to the question contained in the fourth point, namely: does linguistic proximity go hand in hand with cultural proximity? Attempting to give a definitive answer to this question may be premature given the current state of our knowledge. However, it is clear from the data considered here that they probably do not. Looking at their cultural identity, it should be clear that the Ogiek, as semi-nomadic HG, have little or nothing in common in terms of productive activities, technology, practices and beliefs with peoples such as the Kipsigis or Nandi, who are sedentary agriculturalists.

According to reports from Huntingford (1927, 1931, 1955 and 1972), some Ogiek groups started sheep farming in the 1920s when their contacts with the Nandi became more frequent. Today, they use sheep as a luxury item, to exchange spouses and for the prestige that comes with owning many animals. Like the Ogiek, the Nandi also attach great importance to honey production. Beehives are, indeed, the only assets passed down from father to son. However, these are examples of a relatively recent "commonality" that is too recent to justify such a pronounced linguistic similarity, both in terms of vocabulary and (especially) morphology.

Conversely, despite their cultural proximity to the Akie in Tanzania, who, like the Ogiek, are semi-nomadic HG and have a similar bow and arrow-making technology, the two languages are further apart.

Furthermore, despite the long-standing reciprocal relationship between the Ogiek and the Maasai, and despite the exogamous practices in which Ogiek women marry Maasai men, there is no evidence of cultural or linguistic exchange between the two groups.

Finally, it should be added that many Ogiek living near Maasai communities in the Narok District decided to settle in the region and take advantage of Maasai hospitality in the 1970s, when they saw that the Mau Forest was rapidly diminishing. This process did not lead to cultural or linguistic contamination, but rather to the Ogiek abandoning their own language and culture/technology in favour of an unquestioned and complete adoption of Maasai language, culture and practices.

4. Ogiek and Akie: how far apart are their traditions? Some preliminary observations based on the Akie corpus published in 2020 by König et al.

The reading of the Akie corpus published by König et al. in (2020) is indeed very interesting for the reconstruction of the history of the two groups (Ogiek and Akie). By comparing the contents of my Ogiek corpus with the data presented by König et al., it is possible to say with even greater certainty that the two peoples probably emerged from a single common group than is possible considering linguistic data alone, due to their high degree of similarity (see Micheli and Legère 2023).

The Akie corpus consists of 16 long texts that can be divided into 3 sub-corpora, each consisting of:

a. 9 texts with historical or biographical accounts, which can be further subdivided into: 1) accounts of mythical-historical facts related to the origins of the Akie tribe (two texts) or personal facts attesting to the Akie lifestyle; 2) accounts of honey harvesting (two texts); 3) accounts of hunting (2 texts), 4) description of religious performances (1 text on circumcision of boys - *kulantáisye*); 4) accounts of women's lives (2 texts).
b. 6 texts containing folk tales.
c. only 1 text representing a long blessing recited by about 15 Akie women and men who participated in the ceremony of *Blessing the hunting weapons* in 2013 in the presence of the researchers.

4.1.1 Commentary on the 9 texts with historical or biographical accounts (point a).

The texts belonging to this group are precious, since they contain very interesting material for comparison between the Ogiek and Akie cultures.

1. In their introduction to section 4.2 König et al. report an Akie-specific name for their god-creator, called *Tororeita*. This seems to indicate an independence of the Akie from traditional Maasai religious nomenclature, that is not common to the Ogiek of Mariashoni, who usually give God the Maasai name of *Asista* (Micheli 2019: 90). Nevertheless, alternative name for God are attested in the Ogiek corpus, which, however, are different from the Akie *Tororeita*. In one of the songs contained in the corpus (*The song of Mariashoni*), two different names for God appear: *Jehowah* (an evident loan from the christian religious tradition) and *Ingòlo* (traditional).
2. In the introduction to text 4.3.1 "*Bahati hammering stakes into a baobab*", the authors emphasises that '*the high economic and cultural value that baobabs have for the Akie is to be seen in the fact that the trees are clan property, inherited from father to son*'[8], which is consistent with what Huntingford reports for the Ogiek beehives, as mentioned above (§ 3).
3. The last part of text 4.3.2 "*Papalai describes how the honey is harvested*" contains a clear reference to the economic relations between Akie and Maasai, with the latters acting as buyers of the formers' products - in this case ropes made from kudu skins that the Akie produce thanks to their hunting activities in the forest. This dynamics are very similar to those regulating the relationships between Ogiek and Maasai in Kenya as described in Huntingford (1927, 1929, 1931, 1955, 1972), Kratz (1980), and Micheli (2013, 2014a, 2016, 2017).
4. In the Akie texts 4.4.1 "*Korósee, the smoke birds*" the high value that the Akie attach to certain birds that can bring positive or negative news becomes particularly clear. Although the *Korósee* bird does not appear in my Ogiek corpus, the special bond between the Ogiek and the birds is clear. For example, looking at all the published and unpublished Ogiek material, there is evidence of a mythical bird associated with lightning (*ílèt*), and a number of Ogiek names for various birds useful for a range of traditional uses in the Ogiek tradition are reported in the Ogiek Dictionary (Micheli 2019).
5. According to evidence in both corpora, there is a special celebration for the circumcision of boys in both the Akie and Ogiek traditions. Although I was unable to record the Ogiek name of the ritual event - which in Akie is called

[8] König et al. 2020: 46.

Kalantáísye (König et al 2020: 4.5.1) -, in Mariashoni I was able to record a specific ceremonial song that is sung when the circumcised boys come out of the forest after the completion of the ritual (my unpublished text 30 "*Nyangulelò*"). As far as circumcision rituals are concerned, it is interesting to note that the Ogiek of Mariashoni also recognise a female circumcision (*tumdò* - my unpublished text 25 "*Asa! Igò!*"), which is not mentioned in the Akie corpus of König et al. (2020).

6. The two texts on the position of women in Akie society in König et al. (2020 - 4.6.1 "*Nenkishon tells about her life*" and 4.6.2 "*Nevumba tells about the relationship between Akie and Maasai*") show, in comparison to Micheli 2017, that the world of women in the two societies is quite similar. Girls are married very early and their marriages are often exogamous. Akie and Ogiek girls who are married to Maasai men (first choice) give up their language and traditional way of life and their children grow up as Maasai, completely detached from their original culture. This is to some extent confirmed by the words of Nevumba Karuwa in König et al. (2020: 94-95):

> " 34 Ko pa kó iyya wáárɛɛ
> […]
> They produce children [with our girls]
> 35 anan wáárɛɛ chat ko má táá kó nkun-ɛɛch ɛɛchɛɛ
> […]
> And these children will not know any of us any longer
> 36 ko pa ko éé ikáá puuni[9] (sic!)
> […]
> They will become like the Maasai".

4.1.2 Commentary on the 6 folk tales (point b).

In this group of texts, which combine the two categories a) and d) identified in §2 on the organisation of my unpublished Ogiek corpus, two elements are worth mentioning:

1. The animals that appear in the texts have the same characteristics as those that appear in my corpus. Unlike in the Bantu tradition, the animals in the Akie tradition do not represent human characteristics. However, because they are animals and live in close communion with nature and the spirits of the forest, they see and know things that humans ignore. Therefore, they have the ability to warn humans of potential dangers and they tend to be helpful and assist Akie people in difficult situations. This is particularly evident in the tales 4.7.1 "*A Child Called Ntaakwa*" and 4.7.3 "*The Fat Girl and the Monster*" (König et al 2020) and in my texts 4 "*Mama Tarpandich and the baboon*", 8 "*Soròruak*", 9 "*Cockroaches*"[10], 12 "*Hunt*".
2. All the texts in this subgroup revolve around the figure of what the Akie call the *Tiantáákɔmɛ*. The *Tiantáákɔmɛ* is an ogre absolutely similar to the Ogiek

[9] As already seen above - footnote 4 -, in Ogiek the word *puuni* actually means "*enemy*". This translation of *puuni* as "*Maasai*" apparently with no negative nuance is, however, what appears in König et al. (2020).

[10] Although this story is incomplete, it tells of three sons whose father died, leaving the first two with cows and the last with a sack full of cockroaches. The narrator did not remember how the plot developed. However, by the end of the story, the last son, who had inherited the cockroaches, had become much richer than the other two, apparently with the help of the cockroaches.

Tyemosit. Indeed, in both traditions, the ogre is a creature that can take both an animal and a human shape. Be that as it may, the existence of two different names for one and the same figure would not be surprising if the term *Tyemosit* not only appears in the Akie texts, but also refers to a completely different figure in the Akie conception. For the Akie, the *Tyemosit* represents, in fact, the father of all ancestors (König et al 2020: 70 "*Boys who are to be circumcised […] are taken away from their mothers to be chased with sticks and thorns into the wilderness to saang', the shrine where the leader of the ancestors (tiemáási) lives*"). For the Ogiek it is instead nothing but a monster. In my tale 5 "*The narrow path and the large one*", the narrator describes the *Tyemosit* in this way: "*The tyemosit, you see, is like a person, and it's not a person; what lets you know it's a Tyemosit are the hair, it does not have a head like a person; it has a very wide mouth, very thin the front legs, very fat those for behind*". This shift in meaning is quite intriguing. On the one hand, we have a word, *Tyemosit*, which is morphologically very simple as it has the form of a simple personal noun. On the other hand, the term *Tiantáákɔmɛ* is obviously a compound word. The first part of the compound, *tianta*, is a noun and has the meaning of "wild animal" (see König et al. 2020: 255). Nevertheless, *tianta* is also used as "*an avoidance term for an animal whose name is not given in order to keep it away*" (König et al. 2020: 50). The second part of the compound word, *kɔmɛ*, is more difficult to translate. However, I suspect that it could be a verbal form derived from the verb "*am*", "*to eat*" (König et al. 2020:142), which is preceded by a relative marker, with the possible overall meaning of "*the wild animal that eats [you]*". Is it possible that *Tiantáákɔmɛ* and *Tyemosit* were originally one and the same thing and that *Tiantáákɔmɛ* was an avoidance noun for *Tyemosit*? In both the Ogiek and Akie texts, the Ogre is often married to an Ogiek/Akie girl and/or keeps her captive in his house. This means that they may have children, who sometimes manage to escape the ogre with their mother and join their original clan (see text The ogre and the child - König et al. 2020: 4.7.2). Is it possible, then, that the idea that the ogre, the *Tyemosit* if we call him by his proper name, is the father of all Akie ancestors stems from this? Would it be possible to find a story among the Akie that relates to the origin of the *Tyemosit*? Further research on this point could be very interesting to shed light on the relationship between Ogiek and Akie. Last but not least, it is important to add here that also the Maasai tradition is rich in tales revolving around similar figures of ogres, that are "*formless and are not easily visualized or described*" and are usually called *nkukuuni* or *ŋg'wesi* (Kipuri 1993: 21).

4.1.3 Commentary on the blessing (point c).

Unfortunately, the only text contained in this group has no equivalent in my Ogiek corpus. Nevertheless, its existence, together with König et al.'s assumption that "*the Akie distinguish a number of rituals for different functions*", represents an urgent call for research in this dimension also with regard to the Ogiek tradition.

5. Concluding remarks

To summarise, the analysis of the linguistic data and traditional Ogiek stories obtained through the study of the corpus collected in the Mariashoni region, even in comparison with what can be inferred from the Akie corpus published by König et al. in 2020, does

not provide precise chronological information, but a fairly accurate picture of the power dynamics and economic and social relations between the various ethnic groups that make up the human mosaic of this remote area east of the Mau Forest Escarpment, which stretches between the Narok district, Lake Nakuru and the Kiptunga forest plateaus.

The morphological analysis of the corpus confirms a very close relationship within the Kalenjin family between Nandi, Kipsigis and Ogiek, a relationship that, after comparison with the results reported in König et al. 2015 and with the data contained in Micheli and Legèere 2023, can also be extended to the Akie in Tanzania, albeit to a lesser extent. As for the Tugen and Pokoot languages, the data contained in Kamuren 2011, although quite limited, would tend to place Tugen on this continuum, while Pokoot appears to be more distant. Maa, although also a Kalenjin language, does does not belong to this continuum.

The lexical analysis, especially that of the borrowings in the corpus, confirms a close relationship between the Ogiek language and Kipsigis, to such extent that one of the narrators peppered his stories with words and phrases from Kipsigis that the translator, who understood Kipsigis but could not render it word for word, had to reformulate it into "*standard*" Ogiek. It is interesting to note here that the second language from which most of the words are borrowed is Swahili, while no borrowing from Maa is attested.

As for the content of the stories, they essentially confirm the isolation of the Ogiek of Mariashoni and the Akie of Tanzania from the other sedentary farmers of the region (Nandi and Kipsigis). Unlike the Maasai and the Kapchoi group, which, as mentioned in paragraph 3, could plausibly be an Ogiek clan belonging to the Tyepkwerereg family, Nandi and Kipsigis never appear in the stories as characters, but are merely mentioned in the Ogiek corpus to confirm that they came to the Mariashoni region after the Ogiek settlement. Furthermore, Nandi and Kipsigis never appear in the Akie corpus. At the same time, both corpora exhibit elements common to the Maasai oral narrative as described in Kipuri 1993. This shows once again how the symbiotic relationship between Dorobo and Maasai has left an indelible mark on both of their traditional cultures.

In terms of traditional cultural practices that go beyond orature, the stories and songs that make up the Ogiek and Akie corpora confirm a high degree of similarity between the two groups. In particular, we have discussed: (a) the presence of exogamy - i.e. the passing on of Ogiek (and Akie) women to neighbouring populations; (b) the presence of circumcision of boys; (c) the value of beehives (and baobabs - in Tanzania as far as the Akie are concerned) as the only clan property; (d) the continuous relations with the Maasai for the exchange of goods in both groups.

From all this evidence, we can easily confirm that the Ogiek and Akie continue to share a large part of very important identity traits despite their current geographical distance. This is a clear indication that they were probably one and the same people before they were split into two tribes by the emergence of the Maasai some 400 years ago.

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