
Kenya: Ogiek forest people fight for their rights

While Kenyans celebrate their forty years of independence, the Ogiek remember the forty years of dispossession and institutional marginalisation. They have suffered systematic oppression, suppression and brutality through a policy of assimilation leading to extinction.

The over 290,000 hectares Mau forest complex represents the largest remaining continuous block of mountain indigenous forest in East Africa. The Ogiek people have occupied this forest from time immemorial and are among the only remaining forest dwelling communities in Kenya. They number about 15,000 people, live in groups and clans, speak the Ogiek language, practice selective hunting and perform traditional agriculture within the system of land tenure common to the forest dwelling communities (tree tenure, animal tenure and land tenure). The Ogiek hold their land collectively while individual community members and families enjoy subsidiary rights of use and occupancy. These traditional lands are neither demarcated nor otherwise specifically recognized by the Kenyan laws.

The long history of resistance and struggle of the Ogiek has sustained their unity, identity and cultural distinction. On the contrary, the excision of large chunks of land --the Mau forest provide 70-80% of the total forest area that is intended for excision-- by the Moi regime and the settlement of squatters have threatened their very existence as a distinct people more than ever before. By threatening sacred sites and the habitat within which the community engage in hunting, gathering and other pastoral activities and farming, the logging concessions and the temporarily stopped settlement scheme, not only threaten the integral aspects of the Ogiek community's existence, continuity and culture but it also seeks to kill community's hope of passing on their identity and land to its children.

The Ogiek have helped Kenyans by voicing the official injustices meted against them and their environment by the former regime. Now, that the new National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) Government will formulate a new forest policy, co-ownership and management of their natural resources is a must. Thus, they call upon the government to put in place mechanisms that will see the Indigenous minority forest dwellers enjoying their natural habitats and not to be punished as a results of government policies. These are:

- 1) Access to resources, development and benefits sharing from their territory as that enjoyed by farmers, pastoralists and fishermen.
- 2) Official recognition of their lands and protection from activities which are, in environmental terms, unacceptable or actually unsuitable.
- 3) Put in place criteria and indicators for sustainable forest development that meets the spiritual, cultural and social well-being of the Ogiek and their brothers the Sengwer, Yiaaku, Morti, IIK, Chepkitale etc, all who are forest dependant people.
- 4) Foster the development of sustainable development strategies by the forest dwellers at the National and Local levels.

5) Accept their own concept of protected areas and conservation, based upon their customary laws, traditional knowledge and profound connection with their lands, territories and resources.

6) The settlement scheme sanctioned by the office of the President invaded their private lives, thus blanketing their rights would be inconsistent with the Ogiek demands.

The Ogiek call upon the Presidential Commission of illegal and irregular allocation of public lands to recommend for the revocation and nullification of the forest excision in question.

Article based on information from: "Mau Forest Complex on the spotlight. Kenyan's must be told the truth", Ogiek Welfare Council <http://www.ogiek.org/indepth/news-spotlight.htm> , sent by ECOTERRA International, Nairobi Node, e-mail: mailhub@ecoterra.net