
Kenya: The Sengwer, a traditional culture on the verge of extinction

A traditional hunter, gatherer and honey collector culture, the Sengwer are an indigenous ethnic group from Kenya's Rift Valley, who used to live in small scattered groups spread over large areas in the plains of Kapchepkoilel (Trans Nzoia) and part of Uasin Gishu.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the Europeans came and occupied those lands. The Sengwer did not know that their land had been divided by the colonial government and given out from 1911 to the settlers. Around 1930, the Europeans were well settled and started to chase away the Sengwer and other ethnic groups, even burning their houses. Little by little, the Sengwer came to understand the situation, but it was too late. The Sengwer were constrained to the Cherangany forests, source of numerous streams, springs and rivers some of which flow into river Nile waters and some to lake Turkana. However, they were deprived of any right to the land.

At independence in 1963, the Sengwer thought their land was going to be given back, but assimilation started, cultural practices were influenced and the social economic status of the Sengwer did not improve like it did for the other ethnic groups. So for the Sengwer there was no difference between the colonial and the Kenyan government.

The loss of their ancestral lands has forced them to abandon many of their customs and livelihoods in favour of participation in an economy in which they are systematically discriminated against. Thirty-nine years after Kenya became independent, the Sengwer are still struggling for legal recognition by the government and are one of the most marginalised ethnic groups in Kenya. They are on the verge of extinction. Numbering around 60,000, many Sengwer were assimilated into other communities in the region and only about 5,000 still dwell in their original forest land of the Embobut Forest in Marakwet. Losing their land have implied for the Sengwer not only losing a place to live but a place from where the community have benefited by collecting honey, hunting and gathering fruits and roots as well as collecting plants and herbs of medicinal value.

The Sengwer have little to no representation in local or national government, and have not benefited from land devolution policies in recent decades. The government has taken part of the Sengwer ancestral land and converted part of it into Tea Zones without the consent of the community. Besides, the community does not benefit from this, neither gets any percentage from the proceedings of the produce nor has been compensated. Furthermore, they have suffered the government's disrespect to their identity in the official recommendations that small communities be merged and assimilated into the larger ones.

David Yator Kiptum, executive co-ordinator of the Sengwer Indigenous Development Project (SIDP) --a non-profit organisation devoted to protecting and promoting the rights of the Sengwer-- paints a troubling picture of his peoples' straits: "We are discriminated against in any development project, recruitment for training colleges, employment, [and] our ancestral land taken away during the colonial period has since then been given out to members from other communities, civil servants, politicians, etc. without considering our people."

SIDP has a broad agenda, focusing on the adoption of "profitable and sustainable projects that will enhance education, socio-economic, family health and human rights status (for example fight against wife beating and general domestic violence)" and working "to protect, preserve and revitalise the Sengwer language, culture, traditions, herbal healing knowledge and environment", as its mission statement reads.

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