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The Problem of (un)Belonging: Memory, Land Conflict, and Environmental Degradation in Mt. Elgon, Kenya

by Kevin Wamalwa



Abstract

In the face of the present harsh realities of global climate change, many state-mediated initiatives to protect the environment have supposedly aimed at safeguarding the livelihoods of communities living in critical ecosystems. Paradoxically, however, such ventures have often exacerbated environmental degradation by causing conflict with the communities that claim indigeneity on lands targeted for conservation. In many places in Africa, protracted land alienation since colonialism, a lack of clear land ownership structures, corrupt land deals, and claims of autochthony have bred bloody ethnic battles and contributed to further environmental destruction. This article explores the intersection between autochthony claims, ideas of (un)belonging, ethnopolitical violence, and environmental degradation from the vantage point of memory. I argue that the land-related conflicts in Mt. Elgon, Kenya, are not just a problem of flawed environmental conservation programs but also a failure to address people's memories of "home."

Keywords: Autochthony, un-belonging, environmental degradation, ethnic violence, memory



About the Author

Kevin Wamalwa is a joint doctoral student in the Departments of Anthropology and African Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He studies post-violence memory in Kenya, focusing on how people live and cope with memories of traumatic experiences in ways particular memory and violence informs his involvement in supporting social justice programs in Madison, Wisconsin. With a background in language and literary studies, Wamalwa is interested in how people's talk shapes their daily social interactions and informs how they remember the past and imagine the future to their sociocultural contexts.

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Kevin Wamalwa

Introduction

On June 7, 2020, I belatedly attended the burial of a seventy-two-year-old woman called Joyce in Kaptoboi village, located up in the hills west of Cheptais town in Mt. Elgon. The woman and her eighty-nine-year-old husband had been buried in the rubbles of their house after a massive mudslide swept over their home the previous evening. The husband was rescued alive by the neighbors and taken to Cheptais Sub-County Hospital. Joyce had just been buried when I arrived. Because of the government's COVID-19 restrictions, the family interred Joyce's remains at her son's compound before 11 am the next day following the deadly incident. Her grieving husband, still in pain from the injuries he sustained from the accident, was brought home nearly three hours after the burial. Another neighbor a few meters away was lucky enough to be woken up from his afternoon nap by his nine-year-old nephew just in time to escape the deadly avalanche that destroyed his house. A few homes were deserted in fear, but Joyce's three grandchildren were cooking in their house that stood about twenty meters downhill from where their deceased grandmothers once stood. When I asked them if they were not scared, they affirmed their fears but resignedly said they did not have anywhere else to go.

I spoke with neighbors who pointed out how frequent land-related conflicts in the mountain have caused many deaths, destroyed property, and impoverished families living in the region. "We have been neglected as if we live in a different country and not Kenya," one gentleman echoed what I had heard many times from other residents since I started my fieldwork. I remembered my carpenter neighbor in Kopsiro, Timothy Chesokwo (Timo), who said, "God has indeed remembered us by giving us this fertile

land, but the government has forgotten us.” Our conversation had centered around many problems, including muddy roads that make transpiration of farm produce impossible, lack of safe water, and the general insecurity due to frequent land-related conflicts.

This paradoxical “rememberedness” and forgottenness that the residents like Timo feel juxtaposes their precarious state of belonging in a place and alienation at the same time. Indeed, these conditions characterize Mt. Elgon Sabaot communities who call themselves the *bikapkoret*—that is, “the owners of the land” (sons of the soil)—who for many years have been dispossessed and alienated from the lands they claim belong to them. This claim to autochthony and resistance to eviction threats, whether forcible or by alleged gradual displacement by “outsiders” who come to settle in the region, is one factor that has caused the constant ethnic conflicts and the general sense of insecurity that characterize Mt. Elgon. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the resulting existential ambiguities of belonging (the claims to autochthony) and institutionalized insecurity have produced violence and facilitated destructive farming activities. Practices like clearing forests and bushes, and cultivating under rocks and along the river banks have been some of the factors that have contributed to environmental calamities that hurt families like Joyce’s.

This article, therefore, explores this intersection between claims of autochthony, ethno-political violence, and environmental degradation from the vantage point of memory. As Kevin Dunn (2009) avers, the memory of victimization can and has often been a justification for inter-communal political violence. He aptly puts it, “a violent cycle of memory and counter-memory, where one remembered atrocity justifies another, or in some cases, a pre-emptive attack to thwart an expected atrocity built in the remembrance of past wrong-doings” (123). This vicious cycle of attacks and counterattacks may be hard to end if more than one group among the warring parties claims autochthonous rights. I build on Gabrielle Lynch’s (2011) view that autochthony claims and ethnically aligned multiparty politics have contributed to recurrent violence in Mt. Elgon, but take it further to situate the volatility of Mt. Elgon’s social and political conditions in a memory discourse. In what she calls the “anthropology of environmental education,” Amy Stambach (2016) argues that “the environment, broadly understood, is simultaneously the cause for, the product of, and the solution to problems concerning politics” (of belonging and memory) (412). People’s memory—the longing and their search for “home” and a sense of belonging—has led to encroachment in forested and water catchment areas, causing conflict both among social groups and between them and the state.

I begin with a description of the history of land conflict in Mt. Elgon and how the history of dispossession and displacement has caused ethnic clashes culminating in one of the deadliest armed insurrections in the region by a group called Sabot Land Defense Force (SLDF). I will then discuss how memory, situated in physical landscapes and places that constitute “home,” has complicated resettlement efforts. Landlessness, increasing populations, and constant eruptions of violence have resulted in a lack of proper management of land resources and the destruction of forests for farming. The last section of this paper will present my field observation of destructive farming practices, and how they have resulted in environmental calamities for humans, before concluding with a call for action to address land problems to save lives and the environment.

The Heart of the Problem: Land and the History of Depravity

This paper draws on ethnographic research in Mt. Elgon, Kenya, on a topic unrelated to environmental issues. My ten-month study on what I called “embodied memories of violence” focused on examining how the memories of a four-year land-related armed conflict between 2005 and 2008 shape people’s relationships today and give rise to “complex victimhood” (Jankowitz 2018, 87). For six months, I lived in the Kopsiro region of Mt. Elgon, where the controversial Chepyuk Resettlement Scheme land that sparked the 2005-2008 conflict is located. Then I spent four more months in the Cheptais area, where the military hit harder in their operation dubbed “Operation *Okoa Maisha*” (save lives) to suppress the insurrection. As I traversed the mountain, interviewing residents about their memories of the conflict, I could not help but notice how the mountain lies bare in many places as people clear bushes and forests to plant crops for subsistence. Many residents acknowledged that cases of dangerous mud and rockslides have recently become more frequent than in the past, pointing to destructive forms of land use. What is the source of this problem?

Indisputably, Mt. Elgon is a place of plenty. Blessed with highly fertile soils and abundant rainfall most of the year, the residents have touted the mountain as the breadbasket of not only western Kenya but of Kenya as a whole. Its hardworking residents can be made out easily in the bustling Chwele market by their muddy mud-boots while selling their farm produce—cabbage, onions, and potatoes. Despite the richness of the mountain, Mt. Elgon has been in the limelight for many wrong reasons. Protracted and bloody land conflicts have plighted the region since the 1990s, culminating in one of the deadliest armed ethnic insurgencies in western Kenya’s history by the SLDF group between 2005 and 2008. Many other interclan and interethnic conflicts have occurred across Kenya and have always revolved around land

(Berry 2017). Therefore, the land has become a manipulation tool by politicians who pit communities against communities as they seek to amass a robust ethnic following. The unprecedented commodification and politicization of land have amplified cases of marginalization, oppression, and dispossession due to the inequitable access to (land and other) resources (Greenhouse 2012; Berry 2017). However, a lot more scholarly evidence has indicated that contentions over land and the processes of displacement and emplacement in Kenya have their roots in colonial history (Matter 2010).

The history of Kenya's regional divisions and the creation of local governments are rooted in the colonial history of ethnic groupings. This tribalization of communities into fixed tribal areas and lands has produced strong connections between people and land. However, this colonial heritage does not insinuate a Kenyans' passive reception of those ethno-spatial identities. The "hierarchies of ethnic categories...inscribed via overwhelming processes of subjectification, premodialist assignments ...were [actively] appropriated and made performative" (Dorman, Hammett, and Nugent 2007, 33). The contemporary politics in Kenya indexes this colonial regionalized ethnicity. Kenyans, and perhaps many other nationalities in Africa, have not only perpetuated such regional labeling of ethnic groups, but they have also reproduced and capitalized on them for political and economic capital. It is therefore not uncommon for many Kenyans to appropriate the "us" and "them" dichotomies and lay claim to "our person" and "my people" for political mileage, win court cases, and tilt scales in national wealth and resource distribution. A preview of settler colonialism and flawed land reforms after independence, how it facilitated ethnicization of land in Kenya, and how claims to autochthony emerged from colonial dispossession practices would help put things into perspective.

Colonial History and Land Problems in Mt. Elgon

The establishment of a settler colony in Kenya in the early 1900s created the initial land Crisis in Kenya. By the 1920s, the British Colonial government began demarcating land in the larger Western region, like the rest of the country, to create White Highlands for colonial settlers and African Reserve for Kenyan people (Matin et al. 2014; Lynch 2016; Schade 2017). These White Highlands were agricultural areas with abundant rainfall and fertile soils. The entire Western highlands on the western part of the Great Rift Valley extending from Nakuru to include all the highlands to the west and northwestern side of Kenya—such as Sotik, Nandi Hills, Uasin Gishu Plateau, and Cherangany Hills—became home to colonial settlers. The Sabot clans were displaced from what they deemed "ancestral home" in Cherangany Hills and settled in Mt. Elgon. The Mosop clan (the Ndorobo) was placed in the moorlands of Mt. Elgon, while the

Soy clans—Bok, Somek, Kony, and Bongomek—occupied the lowlands towards Bungoma, which constituted the African Reserves.

By the Kenya Land Commission's (KLC) recommendations, most native reserves haphazardly merged inherently distinct communities and arbitrarily separated others in foreign reserves. Indeed, part of the mandate of KLC was to investigate land tenure systems in various communities and address "certain land problems in the colony of Kenya" (Kenya Land Commission 1934, 1). The Commission reported its findings to the cabinet in 1933, and "His Majesty's Government" endorsed the report (KLC Report 1934). Among the details of its mandate, the Commission was "To consider the needs and desirability and practicality of setting aside further areas of land for the present or future occupancy of— a) communities, bodies or individual natives of recognized tribes, and b) detribalized natives, that is, natives who belong to no tribe or who have severed connection with the tribe to which they belonged" (Kenya Land Commission 1934, 1).

The said recognized tribes and other "detribalized natives" were classified often based on the absence or presence of similarities in linguistic and cultural practices. These linguistic affinities' assessments lacked careful, in-depth study (anthropological or otherwise) and proper consultation with the said native communities. It is evident in the Land Commission's report itself that only a handful of community representatives from across the country were involved in assessing land problems. The Commission reported just 736 witnesses, of which only 487 were natives and the rest were non-natives and government officials. It is possible that the majority of these representatives were tribal chiefs and a few peasants. Therefore, there cannot be an agreement between the native communities and colonial government to segment, amalgamate, and share land resources. The land division between white highlands, reserves, and further segmentation of reserves for various communities was arbitrary and highly prejudiced. The separation of the considered "detribalized natives" contributed to the massive alienation of the communities from their ancestral lands (Shanguhya 2015), worsened by creating protected areas for conservation purposes.

The creation of the Mt. Elgon Forest Reserve necessitated resettlement of the Soy subgroup of the Sabaot to the lower slopes of the mountain. Simultaneously, the Mosop groups were forced to settle in the Moorlands areas on the upper side of the forest in Chepkital. The Mosop group depended on the forest for honey production, on which they subsisted and sold the surplus. The Mosops claim to have not only suffered cultural alienation due to the loss of their lands, but they were also deprived of their means of economic wellbeing and subsistence. For instance, the newly independent government declared part of the forested area a Game Park in 1968, further reducing the

land on which the indigenous groups settled, rendering many landless.

The resettlement program that the government initiated in 1971 by excising a portion of the forest to create the Chepyuk Resettlement Scheme on the lower slopes of the mountain was meant to allot land to the displaced Mosop groups from Chepkitale. However, the other section of the Sabaot—the Soy group—claimed indigenous rights over the identified area because they had resettled there since the colonial restructuring. Feeling dispossessed, especially during the third phase of Chepyuk resettlement that started in 2002, the Soy formed the Sabaot Land Defense Forces to dispel the incoming groups and fight the government institutions. Some scholars have indicated that the resettlement process characterized by nepotism and corruption was the trigger for the deadly conflict (Simiyu 2008). As Parker Shipton stated in the review article of the 1994 *Annual Review Anthropology*, “[n]othing excites deeper passions or gives rise to more bloodshed than do disagreements about territory, boundaries or access to land resources. Nor is anything more likely to prevent misunderstanding across cultures, harmful to both humans and their habitat, than thoughtful definitions of landholding in the first place” (347). “Thoughtful definitions of landholding,” however, can be elusive when the state has ulterior, economic motives for displacing people from the land and designating portions of the area as protected land.

Memory, Identity and the Environment

The socio-economic marginalization that typifies formerly displaced communities under colonial rule and the white settler system has increased human infringement into water catchment and forested areas. The surging numbers of populations in protected areas, including forests and “water towers,” have often been the cause of frequent, often bloody, conflicts between populations and the government. While there is every reason to remove populations from forests in danger of depletion, it proves hard to evict such people who have a strong attachment to what they call ancestral lands. For them, leaving would mean deprivation of their means of survival and discontinuity with their ancestors’ world, loss of cultural and religious identity—similar to what John Connell and Nancy Lutkehaus (2017) have observed among the Manam Islanders.

Such literature on the conservation of human habitats, and natural resources exploration, land rights, and colonial history of dispossession have tended to focus on two issues—namely, the precarity of life of the native and indigenous people and human rights violations that accrue from conservation and resource extractions in their habitat. As such, indigeneity is perceived as a given, and the indigenous peoples’ human rights are perpetually violated. Indeed, historical attachments to land and geophysical spaces have created and entrenched the idea of indigeneity and autochthony in many

Kenyan social groups. These identities that are often mapped onto geographic, electoral, and administrative demarcations have often engendered constant politico-ethnic violence and massive displacements.

Michel Agier's (2016) elucidation of the concept of the border and borderlands as always contested and "unstable" is useful for thinking about relations that emerge around the border and within borderlands, and notions of home and unbelonging. The instability and contested nature of borderlands and homelands is indeed the trigger of conflict, war, and displacement. However, it is also a vantage point for redefining identity. Agier's perspective on indigeneity and autochthony as "unstable" (35) is helpful in considering the effects of displacement.

I agree with Michel Agier's (2016) perspective that identities like ethnicity are constituted of a series of dislocations and relocation, "of migrations, chances, and accommodations" (33). This point of view, according to Agier, challenges the ideas of indigeneity, ethnic differences, and autochthony as fixed identities that particular social groups possess in opposition to the outsider-other. Instead, such identities consist of intricate dialogic processes (Bhabha 1996). According to Agier (2016),

[i]n fact, no human has ever been 'indigenous,' and all borders have always been unstable. The first arrivals, 'already here' when others arrive, transform themselves into an 'always here' on the basis of a relative and strategic point of view vis-à-vis the followers . . . No human has really 'arisen from the land' (the more or less literal meaning of 'autochthonous'), and the displacement of humans (in groups, families and individually) over the surface of the Earth has been part of the history of humanity since its beginnings. (35)

This idea of "already here" and always here is a dimension of memory. People often make claims of "we have been here as long as we can remember." While they "have not arisen from the land," as Agier puts it, their memories are written in the lands they have lived in as long and as far back as their memories can go. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that land conflicts, the dilemma of environmental conservation, and the marginalized peoples' rights are memory issues. Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017, 295) aptly sum up this relationship between place, place names, and memory by stating, "memory sits in bodies in places in which the past and present coalesce and find a new unity. Returning to a place, experiencing its material presence plays an active role in a recollection in a profound sense, linking persons and events, situating them in a landscape." Therefore, landscapes and other forms of material environment embody

memories that represent interpersonal relationships and social differences between groups in different environments and predicate the futures of such relationships.

Nevertheless, such memory is unbounded—it often tends to have no specific beginning, and it envisages futures beyond many generations to come. This sense of permanence, of belonging in a place, produced by memory, is reproduced and wielded differently for political and economic ends. Mt. Elgon presents a unique example because of its ethnic composition and the multiple displacements of people due to political violence arising from ethnic antagonism. Violence has often erupted based upon and legitimated by these identities of ethnic differences, autochthony, and otherness (Dorman, Hammett, and Nugent 2007). Electoral politics have historically pitted one ethnic community against the other, often ending in bloodshed and evictions.

Displacement of people from their homes and their farms on which they have already formed attachment makes them live in “nowhere-places.” For instance, people who moved out of the disputed Chepyuk farms live in shopping centers as renters, and others live with their relatives in areas like Cheptais. One such person is Chebet, a woman in her fifties, who lives with her three daughters in a small room of a shop building given to her by a well-wisher at Land Bung’ungwo in Kospiro. Her other two daughters are married and live with their husbands at the same shopping center. Two married sons live in Kipsigon, about eight kilometers away. Chebet’s family does not have land of their own since they were removed from Chepyuk lands. They still, however, find menial jobs of harvesting onions, potatoes, and corn on the farms of other people who were allocated land in Chepyuk. Thus, Chebet’s and other families tend to live in the peripheries of social spaces. Just like internally displaced persons, their dwellings are temporary, supplanted from a previous place, and at the same time unintegrated into any particular social space. Thus, they continuously experience a conflicted sense of belonging and unbelonging to wherever they live.

However, home as a place is constructed and imagined differently among the people who have been displaced from how it was conceived before leaving. Even if they were to return, the imagined, the nostalgic home, would possibly be completely different from the actual physical places they return to after many years of uprootedness. However, as the studies of diasporic communities have shown, transplanted and displaced people have exploited not just their memories of “homeland” but, more importantly, their paradoxical sense of “(dis)belonging” (Allison 2012) to create solidarities. As Cynthia Cockburn (1998) states, “it is more difficult to recognize the danger in an attachment to land and home than in the belonging associated to ethnicity and nation. . . . But often the feeling of belonging to a place is

mobilized competitively as a source of ethnic or national cohesion” (40). This ethnic cohesion created by mobilizing the collective sense of belonging to a place also extends to include the strivings for ethnocultural purity, which produces hostility against people of other ethnicities and the misuse of land resources.

In recognition of Mt. Elgon’s land problems, the government engaged the community to protect forested areas by establishing the Community Forestry Association (CFA) to train residents on sustainable, environment-friendly agricultural practices. This way, CFA recognizes residents’ subsistence needs and facilitates safe farming within forest lands. Intercropping was one way the communities could reclaim deforested areas and still produce food for family consumption. The rationale behind this approach is that the community plants their crops in deforested areas but plant new trees. They would farm in the plots for a few years until trees overgrow their crops, and then they would move to a new plot and do the same. However, as one community leader explained to me, this approach has not saved the forest but instead exacerbated encroachment. “When the government provides people with trees, they plant the seedlings but then later pull them out, and they dry,” he explained. In the end, no trees survive, but people keep encroaching on new areas. New solidarities have emerged in this practice defeating the initial intentions of the CFA. Local CFA groups have created new patronage networks that lease out portions of lands in areas that need to be reclaimed.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined how the processes of displacement, return, and resettlement can adversely affect the lives of the displaced people and create spaces in which new relations and interpersonal identities can emerge. Anthropologists of displacement have also demonstrated how the precarious spaces that the displaced occupy have transformed the conceptualization of home and homeland, border and borderlands, and indigeneity. As such, these categories are no longer perceived as static givens but fluid, contested, and unstable. In a region like Mt. Elgon, where social differences between groups of the Sabaot community are spatial rather than ethnolinguistic and cultural, indigeneity based on “having been there first” makes conflict resolution complex.

In contribution to the anthropological scholarship of environmental education, Stambach (2016), indigeneity and ethnicity, and peace studies, my paper proposes that Mt. Elgon’s human-environment problems call for a proactive and holistic approach in conserving the environment and ending social strife. A proactive approach to land-and-environment-related conflict in Mt. Elgon means that the government and other

stakeholders should anticipate issues and consultatively build community-based mechanisms for peacebuilding and environmental conservation. To build these mechanisms, the state and other community stakeholders should not approach land issues in isolation, but rather holistically. It is an intersection of many multilayered factors that create problems in the region—colonial historical injustices, ethnic marginalization, political incitement, and general political and social instability.

To solve the problem, the Kenyan leadership should address the memories of pain, losing homes, dispossession and displacement, and the memories of oppression and marginalization of the Sabaot people. The past must be brought to the present to be acknowledged and healed before people can chart a new way forward.

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