

Forces that Occasioned the Mau Ogiek People's Ethnic Dress, Kenya

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Abstract

The Mau Ogiek are an ethnic minority, forest-dwelling hunters and gatherers who inhabit the Mau Forest Complex. The people still don their ethnic dress to date, though sparingly. This paper discusses the forces that occasioned the construction and wearing of the indigenous dress. The forces include materials, religion, isolation, social attitudes and values, trade, lifestyle, cultural experts, matriarchy versus patriarchy and indigenous knowledge. A lot of significance is attached to the dress thus, it is constructed and worn in conformity with the normative order for dress and clothing customs. Barter trade with the Maasai people avails gariig, red ochre and brass for fashioning ilmintoisieg and taet. Hunting and gathering occasioned the fabrication of motoget, oguriet op poinet, guiyang'nta, ingerut, and long'et. The documentation of the dress has provided a cross-cultural point of view on the universal theories and practices of dress and adapting the same to an African ethnic dress.

Key Words: Dress, Mau Ogiek people

1.0 Introduction

The Mau Ogiek people are an ethnic minority who are forest-dwelling hunters and gatherers. The people inhabit and claim the Mau Forest Complex in Kenya as their ancestral land (Ng'ang'a, 2006). The term Ogiek means "caretaker of all" plants and animals (Ogiek Peoples' Development Programme [OPDP], 2010). The community has faced several evictions from the forest, first by the colonial administration and later by successive independent governments. In addition, the group has been acculturated by the large neighbouring ethnic groups namely the Maasai and Kipsigis. The Mau Ogiek are referred to by some ethnic groups using derogatory terms such as *Dorobo* or *Il-Torobo* to mean "a poor person, a person who has no cattle and who therefore lives on the meat of wild animals" (Ng'ang'a, 2006; Ogot, 1981). The community remains "uncounted people" because during the year 2009 population census they were clustered with the large neighbouring ethnic groups (Kavilu, 2010). Despite the discrimination, the Mau Ogiek people have held on to their culture, both material (dress) and non-material. Dress is both a noun and a verb, thus it encompasses acts and forms of appearance management. As a noun dress is an assemblage of all outwardly detectible body modifications and all supplements/materials added to it by a person in communicating with other human beings. The definition is gender-neutral. As a verb or a process, dress refers to the act of altering or adding to appearance (Eicher & Higgins, 1997; Kaiser, 1997).

2.0 Forces that Occasion the Construction and wearing of Indigenous Dress

2.1 Dress Construction or Technology

Many Africans still wear their ethnic dress in the twenty-first century. The dress in various patterns, types of dressings, materials, construction detail such as style, colour and fashion and meanings may be influenced by materials, religion, isolation, gender distinction, trade, technological advances, matriarchal versus patriarchal society, lifestyle, social attitudes and values and indigenous knowledge (Chanda, 2006; Ng'ang'a, 2006; Arthur, 1997; Joshi, 1997; Kaiser, 1997; Fisher, 1987).

2.2 Sources of Design Inspiration

Before dress is constructed, the style has to be designed. The sources of design inspiration are diverse, which include the female gender among the Baluba society, mythological beings, the ancestors of the community, the fields that give sustenance, religion, political goodwill and the characteristics of materials and so forth (Baizerman, 1997; Barnes & Eicher, 1997; Fisher, 1987). The style of dress incorporates among others aesthetics or perceptual elements of dress which relate to the principles and elements of design. The elements of design include line, form, space, texture, pattern and colour. On the other hand, the principles of design are balance, proportion, scale, emphasis and unity. The principles and elements of design are combined or organized to create an aesthetic dress. The two concepts take meaning only when they are seen within the context of the total appearance of a costume (Horn & Gurel, 1981). Ayo (1995) asserts that in Africa patterns and colour are very important ingredients in everyday life, of which dress is no exception.

2.3 Materials and Techniques for Constructing Dress

The materials used to construct dress include fibres, yarns, fabric, beads, bones, feathers, cowries, skins and leather. Chanda (2006) posits that some materials are used not because they are commonly available, but because they possess special properties such as pliability, aesthetics and ease of cleaning. Bark cloth is worn throughout equatorial Africa wherever the fig tree grows. The men of the Songye people of Zaire, wear pantaloons 'men's close fitting trousers worn in former times' made of bark cloth (Fisher, 1987). Dress materials can be treated by being gathered, draped, pleated, embroidered, shirred, or dyed. Some construction techniques include seams, control of fullness, edge finishes, openings, fastenings and pockets (Kaiser, 1997).

3.0 Discussion

3.1 Forces that Occasioned the Mau Ogiek People's Indigenous Dress

The following forces shape the Mau Ogiek's ethnic dress, materials, religion, isolation, social attitudes and values, trade, lifestyle, cultural experts and matriarchy versus patriarchy.

3.1.1 Materials, Religion, Isolation and Social Attitudes and Values

The skin of hyrax, the major raw material for the Mau Ogiek's ethnic dress is still available though with the government's ban on hunting, women have to buy it from the men at a very high price. Other materials such as beads are readily available in the market. The group has adopted various denominations of Christianity. The denominations have no say in their material culture, thus they are free to wear their ethnic dress when attending church service. The dress includes *gariig* 'glass beads or glass beads necklace' and *taet* 'brass bracelet or necklace' among others. Isolation, especially for those living in the Mau Forest Complex, has ensured that they have minimal encounter with outsiders. Thus, the same materials, majorly obtained from the forest and pattern of dress prevail. *Mwenigg op itig* 'women's earrings' are fabricated from leather and *rungut op metit* 'club' from wood. The Mau Ogiek have always attached a lot of significance to their material culture, thus, the dress has to be constructed and worn in conformity with the normative order for dress and clothing customs. The women drape *oguriet op nderit* 'hyrax pelt cloak' and *leginjus* 'beaded leather vest or skirt' over the shoulders and fasten them at the chest. On the other hand the men pass the *menegupet* 'leather vest' under the left hand and fasten it on the right shoulder.

3.1.2 Trade

Trading with their neighbours, especially the Maasai has gone on for a long time. The trade brought about adornment of the dress. The community exchanges *gomek* 'honey' for sheep and cattle which provide skin and other materials that are used to construct the dress. For instance, *kweog* 'men's sandals', *legetiet* 'women's belt' and *rosiet* 'headdress'.

The barter trade also avails *gariig* 'beads', red ochre, brass for *ilmintoisieg* 'men's earrings' and *taet* and metal for *rotwetop chok* 'sword'.

3.1.3 Lifestyle and Cultural Experts

The Mau Ogiek's lifestyle, that is, gathering honey and wild edible fruits and herbs and hunting wild animals and birds, are men's responsibility. Honey, since time immemorial has been central to their culture. The people then construct *oguriet op poinet* 'bushbuck pelt cloak', *motoget* 'honey bag', *pineet* and *inaing'omiit* 'indigenous match stick' and hunting tools such as *guiyang'nta* 'bow', *morogiit* 'quiver', *ingerut* 'arrows', *tenget* 'spear' and *long'et* 'shield' among others. The result contrasts with Adepegba (1986) who asserts that the Fulani nomadic lifestyle does not encourage large material properties, thus, they focus much attention to their personal appearance. The attention is not only in the ways they bedeck their bodies, but also from the mirror which is sewn into a leather wallet. The mirror is always hung from the necks on their chests so that they can check up on their appearance from time to time. The mirror is worn by both men and women in their adolescence and early adulthood.

Since time immemorial cultural experts have existed among the people. These experts are very knowledgeable on the group's cultural issues, both material and non-material culture. The elderly women and men and other members of the community who have a high level of ethnic identity, were called upon to either instruct on the construction of dress or fabricate it. The dress must be made according to the non-material culture tenets, such as normative order for dress and clothing customs. The finding concurs with that of Kefgend and Spencht (1986) that dress is constructed and worn to recapture one's heritage especially that which has been eroded by culture contact.

3.1.4 Matriarchy versus Patriarchy

The community is generally patriarchal, thus girls and women were required to observe high standards of modesty. In earlier days, the *tiet* 'uninitiated girl' wore *kerepeita* 'hyrax pelt apron' to cover their genital area while the *mureret* 'initiated females' donned *leginjus* and *kauya* 'beaded male bushbuck leather skirt'. The women completely covered their bodies such that the length of *oguriet op inderit* and *leginjus* had to extend from the chest to be below the calves. The men ensure the continuity of dress for diverse occasions by overseeing various cultural occasions and their accompanying ethnic dress. Boys' circumcision is strongly upheld in its totality and its accompanying dress. The community, however, is gender sensitive hence it includes women in the council of elders. The women, therefore, have a say in the matters concerning the indigenous dress.

3.1.5 Indigenous Knowledge

The Mau Ogiek are experts on where to and how to hunt wild animals, especially the hyrax, constructing ethnic dress using hyrax, bushbuck, sheep, cow and monkey skins and *impiniit* 'indigenous awl' and *ieneet* 'sinews' and the conservation and preservation of the dress. The community is also highly knowledgeable on the characteristics of the materials, thus they determine how to use a certain material for constructing dress. Scraped bushbuck skin and later scraped sheep skin is used to produce the women's *leginjus*, since both are very soft, smooth and pliable, thus comfortable and warm to wear. The *menegupet*, is made from scraped dik-dik skin, thus, it is very soft and provides comfort and warmth to the wearer. On the other hand, bushbuck pelt is used to construct *oguriet op poinet* worn by men for hunting as it is harder and stiffer than hyrax pelt. The former, thus, provides better protection to the wearer in the rough forest environment. In addition, *oguriet op poinet* was used for camouflage which confused the bushbucks thus men could easily kill them. Male bushbuck skin is the only material used to fabricate *legetiet* and *choget* 'scabbard' as it is heavy and stiff. Buffalo skin was previously used to construct men's *kweog* as it is very hard thus, it provided maximum protection to the wearer. The finding is similar to Dei (2000) that indigenous knowledge is personalized, that is, there is no claim to universality.

The *motoget* is made from scraped hyrax skin, as it is light and durable, thus, appropriate for long travel. Harvested honey is put in the *motoget* and ferried home. A honey harvester needs portable tools such as *pineet* and *inaing'omiit* for producing fire. The items must be kept dry and are thus carried in a *morogiit*, which is also used to store and carry *ingerut*. Indigenous knowledge is used to construct sewing equipment such as *impiniit*, *ayuet op kusiet* 'hide scraper' and *gisienjot* 'indigenous chisel' in addition to *ieneet* which are then used to fabricate the various items of dress.

The *ieneet* and *impiniit* are used to join the pieces of animal skins together to construct cloaks and vests, in stringing together beads to make necklaces, in embellishing *oguriet op inderit* with chain stitch and attaching beads to *leginjus* and *kauya*. The people also understand that *impiniit* easily get lost and construct *sanggida* ‘container’ for storage. The results concur with Olaoye (2005) that among the Ilorin people of Nigeria the dyers and designers used *adire alabere* ‘stitch-dye technique’ to dye fabrics. The thread was obtained from raffia, jute or other fibrous material. In addition, the community used *abere-ilu* ‘indigenous needle’ to stitch as it could accommodate the thickness of the thread.

The Mau Ogiek also smear animal fat on the animal skins to soften and preserve them. The people’s desire for adornment influenced the practice of *gempirr itig* ‘ear piercing’ using indigenous knowledge. Thorns are used to pierce both the upper and lower earlobes. The herbalists provide medicine for healing the wounds. Small bamboo discs are inserted in the holes in the upper earlobe for adornment. The lower earlobes are stretched by increasing the sizes of *nguloleit* ‘round wooden disc’. The *rwaganig* ‘unmarried initiated males’ and *mureret* were then allowed to suspend *ilmintoisieg* and *mwenigg op itig* respectively from the lower earlobes. The earrings were worn till one died. The indigenous knowledge employed by the Mau Ogiek in constructing their ethnic dress resembles that of the Ilorin group of Nigeria. Olaoye (2005) writes that the community had indigenous knowledge in dyestuff, dye production technology and the techniques of dyeing.

4.0 Conclusion

The people through interaction with other ethnic communities obtain glass beads and cowries. The community’s lifestyle of hunting wild animals such as hyrax and bushbuck and gathering majorly honey and wild edible fruits and herbs greatly influenced the construction of the dress. Hence, *oguriet op poinet* is worn during hunting, a role exclusive to men. African culture such as indigenous dress has made and continues to make immense contribution to the world culture and civilization. The contribution may be sustained by documenting the material culture and conserving it in museums.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Woman in *oguriet op inderit*, *mwenigg op itig* and *taet*. Photo by researcher in Nessuit Location. 1957.



Figure 2: Fastening of *oguriet op inderit* and *menegupet* by men. Photo courtesy of the community taken in



Figure 3: *Rungut op metit* and *rotwetop chok* are suspended on the right hand side. Photo by researcher in Nessuit location.



Figure 4: *Morogit* and *motoget* must lie on the left hand side. Photo by researcher Nessuit location.



Figure 5: Motoget.
Photo by researcher in OPDP, Nakuru.
Museum



Figure 6: Ingerut.
Photo by researcher at Nairobi National
Collection dated 1969



**Figure 7: Boy-initiates in girls' dress, *kauya*,
gariig and *leginjus*.**
Photo courtesy of community in Nessuit location
taken in 1998



Figure 8: Woman in *mwenigg op itig*
Photo by researcher in Nessuit location



Figure 9: *Leginjus*.
Photo taken by researcher at Nairobi National Museum
National Museum
Collection dated 1969



Figure 10: *Oguriet op poinet*.
Photo taken by researcher at Nairobi
Collection dated 1969