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SENGWER¹ INDIGENOUS PEOPLES – OUR HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL ATTACHMENT TO KIPTERPERR MOUNTAIN AND FORESTS

INTRODUCTION

Sengwer is an ethnic minority hunter-gatherer Indigenous Peoples living in Kenya and distributed in three administrative districts (West Pokot, Trans Nzoia and Marakwet) in Rift Valley province Kenya. Sengwer Indigenous Peoples are characterized by torture, unrecognition², hopelessness, powerlessness, oppression, marginalization, mal-representation, insecurity, illiteracy, poverty, landlessness and discrimination against.

The population of Sengwer Indigenous community is estimated to be 30000. The only census report that Sengwer was counted as a tribe was around 1948 and 1999. 1948 results indicated that Sengwer were 1000, but this after forceful eviction, displacement and assimilation implemented by the British Colonial government –

Forced Assimilation and Loss of Identity

Colonialist objective of forcing Sengwer community into extinction created total problem and confusion that now "...Marakwet claim that Sengwer is one of their clans. Likewise Pokot claim Sengwer is one of their clans." It is sad and inhuman. We are neither a clan of these communities. Sengwer is a distinct and separate ethnic group.

"My evidence consisted of the requirements of the Marakwet as a whole, not particularly Cherangani, which, I understand, is part of the Marakwet."³

The British colonial government led to loss of Sengwer culture, language, customs and laws. We were treated as slaves in our own ancestral territory.

Forest Preservation was more important to the British Colonizers than the tribal identity of Sengwer.

"...Yes. I feel very strongly on this question of regulating the grazing. If there is any idea, which I understand there is, of amalgamating the Elgeyo and Marakwet and Cherangani into one tribe..."⁴

¹ Also called Cherangany or Dorobo

² 42 years down Kenya's independence line, we Sengwer Indigenous Peoples are still fighting for recognition as a distinct and separate ethnic group. Kenya's government has failed to heed to our call and demand for recognition.

³ Mr. P. Booth, Agricultural Officer of Trans Nzoia, Kitale, giving evidence before the Carter Land Commission at Mr. Hoey's farm on 3rd October 1932

⁴ Mr. A.C. Hoey giving evidence before the Kenya Land Commission on 3rd October 1932

“...In view of the complication that would arise having Cherangany officially residing in 2 separate Districts and under 2 separate provinces. He would reluctantly agree to the move (of Cherangany from Marakwet to West Suk) out of sympathy with the District Commissioner, Tambach, Forest Preservation Policy, and provided that Cherangany in question will agree to surrender their tribal identity...”⁵

“...the Cherangany from forest areas in question should move to Suk...they should become entirely merged in the Suk, Subject to Suk Chiefs, Headmen, Tribunals, Law and Custom”⁶.

“...I agree then the recommendation reported in the prescription that – wherever possible the Dorobo should become members of and be absorbed into the larger tribe which they have most affinity.”⁷

The British colonial government actively ensured total loss of our identity as a separate and distinct ethnic group. We were neither considered as an ethnic group nor as a people who had a right to live, right to identity, right to profess and enjoy our cultural values and traditions.

In 1999 during the population census Sengwer Indigenous Peoples was not listed in the list of Kenyan tribes⁸ to be enumerated in the exercise carried out from 24-31st August 1999. The community members boycotted the exercise and with pressure from human rights organizations the Kenya government accepted to give us (Sengwer) a census code number on 28th August 1999 – but, the results of 1999 census giving a breakdown of tribes and respective population has not been released.

KIPEPERR MOUNTAIN – OUR CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SACRED SITE

Kipteperr Mountain is a rocky mountain in Kipteperr forest found in Marakwet district. It is on the border of West Pokot and Marakwet districts. Sengwer people believe it is part of the sky that fell down. The other name of Kipteperr is **Koteyoi** (*Kipteperr Koteyoi – meaning a mountain where we still here the spirits of our forefathers crying, singing and dance*).

It is believed that Kipteperr Koteyoi was part of the sky that fell – *perr means a bark of a tree*. It was recorded by the then district commissioner at Tambach in 1927, that the rock fell down ten Sengwer circumcision generations (information given to him by Sengwer elders). One circumcision generation could take 10-14 years, therefore the rock fell between the years 1787 and 1827. **NB** Probably this rock felled many years ago than reported.

The fall of Kipteperr occurred on a day when Sengwer Indigenous Peoples the eastern part of **Kapkanyar forest** had a ceremony (**Tum**) that a rock fell on them. Preceding the tragedy a crowbird (**Chepkukwa**) appeared and **flied** over the people in the ceremony. The bird sang “**Kuk Kuk orwachaa met – Kuk kuk shave my head**”, it was requesting the people to shave its head after which it will pass a message to the people. Nobody gave it an attention, people were busy dancing, eating and drinking mead (**Kipketin**), because they said since when did a bird talk. Then the bird flew to a nearby home and there was a woman. It sang again “**Kuk Kuk orwachaa met – kuk kuk shave my head**” while on a tree. The woman paid attention to the bird. The bird demanded a traditional four legged stool be brought and have it sprinkled with milk and **Kipketin** so that it can sit on it. The woman responded and put the stool outside the house. The bird perched and sat on the stool. The woman took an arrow (**Protwo**) and shaved the head of the bird handling the neck with ash. Sengwer believed handling the neck with ash made the colour of the feathers around it turn white till now. Then the bird latter was called **Chepkukwa nyi lel kaat** – a crowbird with white neck.

⁵ Captain M.R. Mahony District Commissioner, West Suk, comments during a meeting in Kapenguria on 17th September 1935.

⁶ Mr. C.B. Thompson, Officer in Charge, Turkana district Dated 17th September 1935

⁷ Memorandum by Mr. C.H. Adams acting Provincial Commissioner Rift Valley to the Kenya Land Commission of 1932

⁸ Recognized tribes in Kenya were listed for enumeration in the census with their respective census code numbers.

Where are your children?, the bird asked after the shaving. “They’ve gone to hunt, collect fruits and honey and some are in the ceremony,” the woman answered. The bird informed the woman that something tragic, fatal is going to happen in that area. It advised the woman to assemble all her family members, inform other villagers around and leave the place as soon as possible to a far place. Some people refused to accept the information. Those who accepted left the place. No sooner had they reached 10 kilometres than they heard a deafening exploding sound behind them. They stopped and saw a rock planted on the area they were living, burying many homes and people in ceremony. It was a tragedy. The falling of the rock took place three hours after sunset. Those people who survived got dispersed within Sengwer ancestral land and others went as far as getting into other ethnic groups.

The survivors of the tragedy became members of the Sengwer clan called **Talai** and its totem is **Chepkukwa nyi lel kaat**. Besides, after this happening the people who remained began praying facing **Kipteperr Koteyoi**. Also, there’s a song sang in Sengwer about **Kipteperr** where spirits of human beings, cattle, goats, etc sing and talk.

Our worry

Kipteperr has historical, cultural and spiritual significance to our survival as Indigenous Peoples, but Kipteperr Mountain surrounded by Kipteperr forest is now being earmarked for gazettement as a government tourist site under the supervision of Marakwet County Council – This is being done without a free, prior and informed consultation of our community as the ancestral owners and Indigenous Peoples of Kipteperr.

The county council has been collecting millions of money in Kenya shillings from our Cherangany forests⁹ and rivers, but we have never benefited as peoples from our resources. Other communities and government institutions have been benefiting while we are languishing in poverty.

Besides, some leaders from Marakwet community the dominant and recognized Kenyan tribe is working to change the name of Kipteperr forests to Marakwet native reserve in order to distort our history and complicate our ancestral and historical land claims. In some maps what used to be Kipteperr forests is now Marakwet Native Reserve.

Our Stand as Indigenous Peoples - Recommendation

- i) We want to have a full control, use and management of Kipteperr Mountain and Forest without interference from Marakwet tribe, County Council, Kenya government and any other national and international institutions.
- ii) We want to be recognized as primary owner of all natural resources in our ancestral and to be consulted before carrying out any development related programmes in our ancestral territory.
- iii) We want the Kenya government and county councils within our ancestral lands to involve our peoples in programmes, legislation and decisions that affect our Indigenous community.
- iv) We want a mechanism to be enacted in conjunction with Sengwer Indigenous Peoples that will look into the distribution of all revenue collected from our natural resources (water, forests, land and minerals) to ensure that we are the primary beneficiary of our resources.
- v) We appeal to international community to send observers to Cherangany Hills and Forests to help bring out the extent of destruction of Cherangany forests.
- vi) We request international Indigenous Peoples and organizations; United Nations and Agencies to help Sengwer Indigenous Peoples realize the above recommendations.

⁹ Cherangany forests include Kipteperr, Kapkanyar, Kapolet, Kerer, Sogotio, Empoput, etc. These forests have over 200000 acres.