

Torobo World View Construct of Nature

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The Torobo living on the southern Mau escarpment in Kenya have adapted and incorporated a portion of hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist, and pastoralist economies with corresponding social traits into their present life experience. This article considers a prominent myth, The Sacred Mountain of God, to discuss how Torobo world view depicts an agriculturalist orientation by emphasizing community unity as a means of political, economic, environmental, spiritual, and personal prosperity. In the Torobo context, one's ethnic identity and relationship with community Other is by supernatural design. Creator God, Enkai, metes out approval and disapproval for both personal and community behavior and does so through the channel of the natural world.

One does not collect the honey from
someone else's beehive.—Julius Ngayami

Introduction

The Maa speaking Torobo people inhabiting the southern portion of the Mau Escarpment in Kenya have a unique interrelation between world view assumptions concerning political ecology. In Torobo thought, notions of Self interacting with community Other (one's in-group), earthly Other (natural world) and supernatural Other (supernatural beings) are integrated concepts with each acting upon the other in a life experience dependent on social, environmental, economic, and supernatural congruence. Political ecology in the African context and Torobo in particular, is a radial concept with

identity, religion, politics, economics, socio-cultural notions of nature and ecology spun together in an intricate web.

Scholars argue the world view category of Self in African world view should be viewed as an open arena whereby both inner and outer influences converge (Fortes 287). The idea of Self conceived as an open force field entails having no structural boundaries separating and insulating the person from the effects of forces surrounding them. Chu suggests this open arena is a stage for three relationships interacting with the person: (a) significant others, including society, nature, and the supernatural, (b) the physical environment, including materials and objects, and (c) thoughts, beliefs and values (253). Self is continually engaged in interaction with these forces throughout the life experience. Germane to the discussion of this article are economic characteristics, social identity and values, and political and supernatural influences Torobo ascribe to their social construction of nature.

The Torobo Context

Seven Maa speaking Torobo groups occupy the mountainous region of the southern Mau Escarpment in Kenya. The closest neighboring tribe to Torobo, pastoral Maasai, inhabit the savannah plains at the western foot of the escarpment; the eastern foot is a conglomeration of mixed tribal affiliations with Kikuyu representing the largest ethnic group. Most Torobo groups have no distinct language defining them as a separate tribe from all others. The majority of Torobo in Kenya speak Nilotic Maa or Kalenjin and share part of their cultural heritage and identity with either of the two larger, more predominant ethnic groups using these languages - the Maasai and Kipsigis. The division of Torobo from surrounding tribes is often difficult and only possible by referring to the hunting-gathering tradition of the Torobo past. The term 'Torobo' is commonly applied to almost any group living or historically associated with hunting-gathering (Kenny 477). It is a catchall term for many bands located throughout the large geographical area of East Africa speaking languages of differing language families.

The Maa speaking Torobo have evolved from a nomadic hunting-gathering society, dependent on wild game and honey, into an agro-pastoral community with permanent settlements subsisting predominantly on crops of potatoes and livestock of sheep, goats, and a few cattle. The first published account of Torobo was by the hand of a missionary, Rev. J. Krapf in 1854.¹ He described the group as, poor people, eating anything they may obtain, they eat the meat of the elephant, and all other game. They cover their huts with dry grass, not with skins as the Maasai do, who therefore boast of their superior houses. These poor people speak the language of the Maasai, but it appears they have also a language of their own, the knowledge of which would undoubtedly enrich the treasure of African philology. (qtd. in Blackburn "Honey in Okiek" 3)

¹ The original work by J. L. Kraft was entitled, *The Vocabulary of the Engutuk Eloikob*.

The Torobo are an enigma to both anthropologists and historians because their original name and language has been lost and the group has assumed much of the language and culture of two major tribes living in closest proximity, the Kalenjin and Maasai. It has been inferred Torobo is a general term for those choosing to leave or banished from their original tribe due to drought or discipline (Van Zwanenberg 18). The conventional anthropological view along with Torobo legend maintains the group was the earliest inhabitant of eastern Africa. Nearly every European explorer mentions Torobo in journal entries including the earliest anthropological writings on the East African area (Hobley 33; Hollis 177; Routledge and Routledge 3).

The majority of East African hunter-gatherer groups, including the Torobo, are separated from each other by the more numerous tribes of pastoral and agricultural peoples. These more populous groups are and have been both politically and numerically dominant. Virtually all African hunter-gatherer tribes are partially or totally surrounded by neighboring pastoral or agricultural groups. In this way, Torobo are partitioned from other hunter-gatherer groups. Woodburn describes their situation as encapsulated (37).

It has been suggested Torobo is derived from the Maa word, short, which reflects local and European belief the Torobo people are descendants from San or Pygmies (Dundas 139). Blackburn concludes the name, Torobo, characterizes the group by their low economic status in the eyes of the Maasai who refer to a Torobo as a poor person since they own little or no cattle and eat wild animals (“Okiek History” 139). Europeans wanting hunters contacted the Maasai who referred them to any tribe who hunted wild animals. Consequently the Maa term, Torobo, lumped together different peoples without regard to their particular tribal affiliation. The name, Ndorobo, is the Swahili term for Torobo and is used to describe the broad ethnic category of hunting-gathering groups residing on the fringes of various east African pastoral and agricultural peoples. The primary criteria for Ndorobo/Torobo identity has been a historical reference to livelihood by hunting-gathering.

Whatever the origin of the title, historically it carried a derogatory tone of condescension, which has not diminished even today. The encapsulating groups did not merely assert their political dominance over the hunter-gatherers, they also treated Torobo as inferiors, as people apart, by stigmatizing and discriminating against the group. The stereotypes held by encapsulating groups are politically potent and color the whole range of interactions between these tribes and Torobo hunter-gatherers.

Social stratification in pastoral African societies is the result of valuing the possession of cattle above all else (Bonte 62). For some, the context of the pastoral livelihood is merged with the identity of the group and individual. The construct of Self the Maasai of Kenya have is the view of themselves as people of cattle (iltung’ana loo ngishu) or people under cattle (entalapu). Maasai notions of Self foster an interrelationship between what they are (people of cattle) and that which they do (pastoralism). Maasai cosmology defines pastoralism as one and the same with being Maasai, thus a significant portion of Self is imbued with nature (Galaty 4). Two social classifications provide Self distinctions of which one is either: (a) Maasai, people of cattle, or (b) non-Maasai, people of hunting and agriculture. Torobo have emerged as a

people making the most economically of both category distinctions despite ethnic prejudices diminishing political power in the regional government.

Maa speakers of Torobo have a kind of peripheral identity associated with Maasai by language and adoption of some Maasai cultural customs and oral literature (Little 444). The inferior place and low status afforded Torobo by Maasai is based on the negative attitude toward a hunting and gathering economy. The inferiority of Torobo from the Maasai perspective is well documented in literature dating back to the earliest accounts of the group.² In the words of Galaty, “The Maasai see themselves as dignified, honorable, wealthy, favored by God, and brave; they see the Torobo (hunters) as offensive, mean, poor, and cowardly” (6).

Most Torobo groups occupy the highlands of west central Kenya centering on the Mau Escarpment, Tindiret forest, and highlands north of Nakuru town. The majority of these geographical areas are in the great Rift Valley. The exceptions are the Digiri and Omotik Torobo living on the savanna plains rather than the highland forest. At one time, Torobo occupied regions of Mt. Kenya and the Aberdares until Kikuyu settled in the area and took control of the region (Kratz “Okiek” 258). With the advent of colonialism, land distribution became managed with definitive boundaries for specified tribal use (Sobania 139). Many forest areas were no longer available to Torobo and a process of diversifying their economic livelihood began and remains in process.

Torobo settlements historically reflected a nomadic lifestyle associated with honey gathering with the people living at different levels of elevation according to honey seasons. As land became appropriated and agriculture more important, Torobo began to settle permanently at middle to upper altitude forest areas. Settlements became fixed in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the Kenyan government demarcating group ranches in Narok District, which subdivided land into individual holdings (Kratz “Okiek” 259). Over the course of time from then until the present, Torobo have retained legal title to land which has attached legal recognition of the group’s existence making them less vulnerable to outside tribal victimization (Kratz “Ethnic Interaction” 189).

The diversification of subsistence by Torobo over the last fifty years has been a gradual process. Similar to the Maasai, Torobo have shifted from a nomadic tribe to more permanent settlements. Traditional hunting and honey collection was initially subsidized by small scale gardening and keeping small herds of domestic animals (Huntingford 607). The shift to predominantly farming and herding from hunting-gathering has taken decades. Most Torobo now rely on potatoes and other crops along with cattle, sheep, and goats to largely subsist and provide a meager income. The long history of honey gathering persists however; honey seems to be a source of not only a prized spirited drink for ceremonial use but also a cherished part of ethnic identity (Blackburn “In the Land” 288). Nonetheless, the days of eating three or four pounds of honey at one sitting are long past.

² One of the earliest references to Torobo was penned by A. Hollis in 1905, *The Masai*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Literature is replete with conflicting opinions on the origin of Torobo yet a number of facts may be established. The group as a separate tribe with a distinct cultural identity is substantiated. It is very likely Torobo preceded the main tribes in Kenya but were nevertheless greatly influenced by these tribes. Torobo have assumed the language and many of the beliefs of the tribe encapsulating their settlements; and still Torobo have somehow managed to preserve political, economic, and ecological characteristics differentiating them from other various tribes.

Political Ecology in Torobo World View

National changes in the political landscape of Kenya the past century or so has resulted in economic diversity among Torobo. Kenya gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1963 and moved from a colonial state into an autonomous democratic government currently representing 61 ethnic language groups (Gordon 131). Lands by this centralized government were allocated according to recognized tribal areas and more defined geographic areas were given the title of legal land holdings. For nomadic and semi-nomadic groups this inevitably changed the economic lifestyle traditionally practiced. In addition, the Kenyan population grew exponentially from around 5 million in 1963 to approximately 39 million today (CIA par. 3). This general populace explosion has greatly reduced the amount of arable land available for ownership and subsistence livelihood.

Torobo have changed from foragers to farmers/herders as a practical solution to less land available for foraging. Hunting and gathering rights to territory became restricted as permanent settlements and ownership were established. Availability of game and natural food from resources was diminished by population growth. Over time these small bands began to stay in favorite locations for longer periods of time, keeping gardens and becoming increasingly dependent on garden production. Torobo were forced to move on to ever dwindling areas and eventually seek ownership of land themselves to join in the evolving national Kenyan awareness of land resource management that requires permanent settlement by land holders.

Torobo have adapted and incorporated a portion of hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist, and pastoralist economies and social traits into their present life experience. As pastoralists, Torobo use livestock products for trade in tandem with a mixed economy as potato farmers. Conversely, African pastoralism tends to be largely an individualistic activity resulting in an affinity between the herder and herd which shapes Self in a fashion Torobo do not share with their domesticated animals. In addition, Torobo avoid challenge at all cost. Unlike pastoral people including the Maasai who tend to be aggressive toward out-groups, Torobo resist open confrontation.

Hunter-gatherer qualities manifest in the highly egalitarian social network that encourages equality among Torobo community members despite generational and gender differences. However, Torobo expect community Other to directly guide and influence each individual throughout their lifetime especially in fulfilling social roles deemed the essence of "Torobo-ness." This is an atypical feature for traditional hunting-gathering groups who normally have little to no direct role expectations of members.

A salient feature of Torobo world view depicts an agriculturalist orientation by deemphasizing individuality and emphasizing community unity as a means of political, economic, environmental, spiritual and personal strength and prosperity. In the Torobo context, one's ethnic identity and relationship with community Other is by supernatural design. Creator God, Enkai, metes out approval and disapproval for both personal and community behavior and does so through the channel of the natural world.

The Sacred Mountain of God

Waal Malefijt has indicated all known cultures distinguish between the physical and non-physical elements of the person with some sort of supernatural involvement (166). The Torobo have three such elements given by Creator God, Enkai: breath (entoma and inkiyanget), soul (enkishui), and spirit (inkiyanget). Each exercise a significant role in the life of the individual. According to Torobo belief, all living creatures are made alive by virtue of enkishui, entoma, and inkiyanget. It is these three elements which enable both man and animal to breathe and maintain life.³

What distinguishes man from animal is not the possession of a soul, divine breath or spirit for all are given these three elements; rather, it is the inherent dominion Enkai has given man over animals and the natural environment and the capacity for reasoning beyond that of animal instinct. The same spirit essence is present in animals as in man, but personal volition is only afforded to humanity. The animal kingdom is drawn into two classes, those with good spirits who are no threat to man and those with evil spirits who are threatening to man. Animals cannot control the spirit within; neither are beasts able to resist the nature of their spirit element. Only man is given the distinction of changing spirit entities within the spirit element. Every Torobo individually chooses to possess either a good spirit or evil spirit.

The spirit element influences decision making for either good or evil by generating desire in either direction. A person initially decides which type of spirit element dwells in the heart, good or evil, but once the decision has been made, the spirit element assumes control of desire and decision. It is only a decision by the individual to ask Enkai to change the spirit element that will allow the person direct authority over the element of decision. Still, decision is under the authority of the person to determine which type of spirit element will be given influential control. It is by personal choice, and the decision may be reversed at any time by invoking help from the divine. Sense of judgment and individual freedom of choice are the elements which differentiate man from animal and give each person an unpredictable life rather than one dictated by instinct. An evil spirit (inkiyangeta torrok) in the spirit element may lead to murder, stealing, insult or envy by the person and the community as a whole. Consequently, inkiyangeta torrok induce drought, famine, hunger, and sickness with the intent to destroy.

³ S. Ashdown conducted field research among the Torobo of the southern Mau escarpment from 1997-2001.

In its most basic form, individual freedom of decision making places man in a superior position over the animal kingdom and gives humanity a self directed life experience the animal world is not privy to know. Enkai has blessed man beyond that of instinctive qualities with a mind and heart that perceives and understands, then judges and makes decisive choices based on reasoning ability. Emotional response and desire separate man from animal in this regard and further separates each person from one another as unique individuals. Socio-cultural traditions may be identical, but individual desires personalize Self and promote self distinction.

The Torobo Self is thought of in terms as something shared by others in the community. The Self is more than something unique to the individual, indeed this uniqueness in and of itself would only leave the person incomplete and dysfunctional. Torobo community has priority over man as an individual, and this suggests a person is defined more in accordance to their membership within the relational scheme of the community than according to private individuality. The mythical narrative, The Sacred Mountain of God, is widely known among Torobo and is an important literary work of fiction which dramatically illustrates supernatural response to social disharmony with the consequence of a natural disaster.

Long ago there was a mountain called, The Mountain of God (*Oldoinyo le Enkai*). This mountain was very important to the Torobo in this time because it was there they went to make sacrifices to God. Then one day the Torobo had a long drought that brought famine to the land. The cattle died of thirst and hunger as the drought spread throughout the whole land. After this sickness followed. Both young and old people died during this time.

After a few days the Torobo elders talked and said we must go to the Mountain of God and find out what the cause is of these disasters. One of the older elders still living, Ole Sankale, was chosen to go and supervise the ceremony. Ole Sankale came from a family of good diviners. He was proud of being asked and agreed to perform the ceremony, but he was also fearful of the work. He said to himself that if he did not perform well then there would be many years of trouble.

Ole Sankale decided to find other elders to accompany him and the warriors. Early in the morning, they got up to go and discuss nearby. Ole Sankale got up and started by saying,

"You men listen to me."

He hit the ground with his walking stick over and over and spit to get ready to talk.

"We are going to leave early when God says to find out about our troubles. It will take us many days. So carry gourds with milk and we will drink along the way."

The following day the men got up early in the morning and began their journey. The donkeys were loaded with gourds and skins to lie on and also they took a fine ox to be sacrificed to God on the mountain. The men slept

many places before reaching the mountain. When they reached the bottom of the mountain, Ole Sankale led them to a place called Olkurroto. Many elders stayed here to wait for the sacrifice to God. They waited to see God take away the disaster that had come upon them. Then as the usual custom of the Torobo, Ole Sankale carried oil in a horn for sacrifice to God. They began the work as usual.

Ole Sankale begin to raise a purple cloth tied around his waist and begin to keep a vow of silence for a few hours in order to talk with God because of the great respect he had inside his heart. When he finished his vow of silence, he spoke in a high voice saying,

"Mighty God, for many months we have been troubled without rain and the grass, rivers and streams have dried up. The cattle are your holy gift to us and they have died. The women and children are troubled because there is no milk or meat for them. The warriors are also weakened by hunger and thirst. Tell us what to do in order to make you happy. Return to us good grass."

Then there came a sound from the heavens followed by loud thunder saying,

"I have seen your trouble. It is clear what has caused it. Over the years you have become a people of war, clan against clan. I have become angry at the death of people and the wrong that is in you. So you have received death and trouble because of your actions. Return to your land and reconcile your friendship with your neighbors. If you do this then the demons will go away, the sick will be healed, and also the rain will fall as in times past."

Ole Sankale bowed down to give God thanks for the answer. God told them the answer. Ole Sankale told the others indeed it is true what we have been told. The very fine ox was slaughtered and sacrificed and they ate other meat at that place. When they finished the ceremony, they threw the bones and leaves into the fire. They packed everything up and Ole Sankale led the way to return home as the others followed behind. When they arrived home they were gladly welcomed with a feast because their journey was a success.

Never again have the Torobo repeated this trouble they reconciled to a close, peaceful friendship. So this is what happened on the Mountain of God.⁴

The apocalyptic event is a great drought and famine ravaging the homeland of the Torobo. The Torobo social construction of nature is such that a devastating calamity involving the natural world is attributed to supernatural direction. Man uses nature for his

⁴ This narrative was collected from Simon Ngayami, personal communication, March 11, 1998, on the southern Mau escarpment, Kenya, transl by S. Ngayami.

benefit but it is only the divine who controls the natural occurring environment. If the good Creator caring for man has set drought and famine in motion, the question then becomes what offense was committed against Creator Enkai to cause this judgment.

Torobo elders journeyed to a cultural holy place, The Mountain of God, to find the cause of the calamity, offer sacrifices, and display sincere repentance. The narrative highlights the social and political age-mate system in which males of the same age and circumcision group share relationships similar in kind to brothers. Each age group provides leadership and service necessary to the welfare of the community. The age-mates referred to in the narrative compose several different age-mate groups. The oldest generational age-mates are lead by Ole Sankale but the egalitarian, hunter/gatherer perspective values younger age-mate elders as equally important. Hence all male age-mate groups are entrusted with restoring relational harmony on the mountain of God with the Creator, the natural world, and reciprocal relationships in Toroboland.

Once on the mountain, it was learned Creator God was very displeased with the tribe for becoming “a people of war, clan against clan.” The misfortune of drought and famine had come upon the people because evil spirits had entered the spirit element of community members and caused Torobo to fight against one another. Enkai showed his great mercy by accepting the penance of the elders and admonished the men that the community must live in unity and harmony; if not, famine, sickness, or drought would come again to cause repentance. This pseudo historical account explains the cultural practice of not stealing or fighting within one’s own Torobo community without severe supernatural intervention as an agent for social justice.

Torobo world view promotes survival of the community as a whole and members individually, but equally important are the social relationships that supply strength for survival and give purpose for living. The Creator has given Torobo socio-cultural ideals to define and maintain a satisfying lifestyle. Integrating Self with community Other in harmonious relationships of mutual benefit enhances the quality of life. A meaningful life cannot exist without the bond of relationships between Self and community Other operating in consonance. Thus Creator Enkai will discipline the Torobo community as a whole for disobeying social rules of behavior that he has instituted to protect the ethnic group. And Enkai does so in a way the divine message cannot be misinterpreted for no other commands Mother Nature.

The value Torobo place on social relationships cannot be overstated. Relational unity within the community is not an optional prerogative. Disunity is classified as a cultural sin that is dealt with on the corporate level and must be forgiven by Enkai. If allowed to continue, Enkai will judge both the individuals in conflict and the community membership as a whole through ecological crises. Disunity in social relationships results in dissonance with the spirit and natural world.

Duration of personal life is directly related to relationships with community Other, which in turn reflect a natural environment supporting the needs of Self and the Torobo community. The world view construct of nature is directly related to Torobo identity that demands honoring the sacredness of community relationships to please the supernatural and reap the benefits of a positive relationship with nature. The actions of

one do not effect only the one. Torobo world view integrates the nature of relationships so that decisions of one community member result in Mother Earth supporting life or threatening life for all living things.

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