Are the Okiek really Masai ? or Kipsigis ? Or Kikuyu ?
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Résumé
Étude des procédés d'auto-identification d'un groupe de chasseurs-collecteurs, les Okiek (plus connus sous le sobriquet péjoratif de Dorobo), aujourd'hui éparpillés parmi les Masai, Kipsigis et Kikuyu dont ils ont adopté certains traits culturels et même, dans une large mesure, les langues. En dépit de la diversité découlant de ces emprunts, et de la date reculée de leur dispersion initiale (c. 1000 A.D.), les Okiek préservent un sentiment d'appartenance commune résultant à la fois de la conservation de thèmes propres (notamment sur le plan rituel) et d'une sorte de volonté collective de contraste avec leurs voisins.

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Are the Okiek really Masai? or Kipsigis? or Kikuyu?*

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From at least the 18th century to the present, the Western view of hunter-gatherers has focused on a number of characteristics: the immediacy of hunter-gatherer contacts with nature, their relatively few material possessions, small social groups and the looseness and flexibility of ties between these groups. Highlighting such traits built an overall impression of simplicity of life. The attitude towards this 'simple life' has ranged from one extreme of the Noble Savage, in which simplicity is seen as a distillation of the essence of mankind, to the other extreme, which submerged hunters to the depths of savagery as unthinking half-animals.

The predominant way to see hunters has been by looking towards the past. In this basically evolutionary framework, hunter-gatherers are usually placed at one end of the developmental scale, and contemporary hunters are seen as a crucial clue to the history of man. Recent writing and research tries to see how much of a clue they really are, seeking to use present-day hunter-gatherers as an analogy to understand what sort of life would leave remains such as those found of Pleistocene hunters. This perspective, especially fruitful in developing an understanding of the range and limits of the ecological adaptations of hunter-gatherers, has led to the recognition and investigation of the complexities within the apparent simplicity of a hunting and gathering way of life.

One result of a focus on hunter-gatherers in the distant past, however, was that their present relations with neighbors could be treated as unimportant or as recent developments that could and should be includ-

ed as little as possible. What is more, hunting peoples have overwhelmingly been characterized as remnants, disappearing, dependent, i.e. as survivals, degenerate survivals at that because they are no longer 'pure' hunter-gatherers but often practice other forms of subsistence as well. It is only quite recently that scholars of hunter-gatherers have begun to realize the implications of their approach and the importance of looking more openly at how hunter-gatherers are living in the present. How are they creatively maintaining their sense of themselves as hunters in relation to their neighbors in a way different from but related to that of their grandparents? What does it mean today when an old man says, 'Ourselves, we have everything. We call ourselves Okiek'? (Ngaroni: 2 January 1975.)

What arise from this reorientation are questions of sociocultural boundaries. Anthropological literature on the concepts of 'tribe' and 'band' is relevant here as it deals with the possibility and manner of defining the units and their boundedness. In one sense, 'tribe' was shorthand for a checklist of shared traits which researchers could use to isolate and justify a 'scientific' unit for consideration. In an overlapping sense, tribe was also used to mean a stage of sociopolitical integration just above the lowest level of band. Since hunter-gatherers were the prime example of the band level, by definition they could not also be tribes. They were thus assumed to lack a real sense of identity and unity as a people beyond the level of the small residential kinship group.

As a classificatory concept, 'tribe' emphasized commonalities and constancy, focused on central or normative aspects of a people and synchronized the principles that organize the generation of a variety of group identities. Different identities (or traits) were thought of as working together concurrently rather than as overlapping principles that could be called on in different situations, at different levels and sometimes at cross purposes. The latter is a 'type of classification [.....] which [.....] is flexible and adaptive, it operates with nuances and degrees, it leaves room for modifications and adjustment in time perspective' (Biebuyck 1966: 510).

The recognition of organizing principles as overlapping and group identity as fluctuating cultivates a view of boundaries as subject to constant negotiations in daily relations, rather than as meant to delineate separable units. This approach has more often been characteristic of

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1. This is due in part to the temporal orientation discussed, but as will be seen below, such stereotypes are also current among peoples who are neighbors to hunters. It has been suggested (Blackburn 1974) that the similarity of Western misconceptions about various African hunter-gatherers is also in part a function of the type of encounter with hunters (see e.g. Turnbull 1961: 13-23). Actual contact with them was often brief. Information was filtered through others who had dealings with them and themselves did not fully understand and certainly did not value a hunting way of life, especially in contrast to their own pastoral or agricultural mode of subsistence.
literature dealing with ethnicity. It is more likely to include a people’s view of themselves and brings a necessary historical dimension back into research about and with other cultures. Frederik Barth’s work on ‘the social organization of cultural difference’ has brought the ‘ethnicity’ approach into ‘tribal’ studies and emphasized the importance of boundary definition and maintenance in ethnic identities.

‘. . . Ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction [. . .] Entailed in ethnic boundary maintenance are also situations of social contact between persons of different cultures [. . .] Thus the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences’ (Barth 1969: 10, 15, 16).

The boundaries and identities of hunter-gatherers have not been approach- ed in this way often enough.

The question of Okiek identity is an interesting and complicated one. The Okiek have been hunters and gatherers of honey for as long as anyone can remember. Within the last ten to forty years they have also become slash and burn agriculturalists on a small scale. People who call themselves Okiek now live in groups of several thousand each, scattered throughout the highland forest regions of Kenya. Each group has as its neighbor at least one larger people, such as Masai, Kipsigis or Kikuyu, with whom they interact regularly.

What sort of sense of themselves do the Okiek maintain in this situation? To date no complete survey of the several dozen Okiek groups has been done. General statements about them are thus difficult to confirm, but the experience of Okiek in one area, the Kaplelach and Kipchornwonek Okiek of the western Mau Escarpment in Narok District, can be suggestive.

**Okiek Named Identity**

One way to enter the discourse of identity is with names—what do people call themselves and what do others call them? This can lead quite directly to the differences and similarities they and their neighbors perceive as distinctive, which may vary according to the situation. Does a sense of separateness or similarity emerge on particular occasions—in conversation, in song or dance, in exchange, in ceremony, in whatever? If so, are these expressions related in some way? are there the mesor common characteristics? The history of the various groupings and their expression will also be important in understanding group allegiances and identities. In a way, understanding a group’s sense of themselves entails seeing how some combination of history and style is enacted within the structures and processes of their life. The boundaries so formed are permeable and shifting, but recurrent.

The Okiek, like many hunter-gatherers, were characterized by early

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2. My field research with these Okiek groups was in 1974-1975.
European explorers and scholars as serfs or outcasts of their more numerous neighbors. They were written of as remnants, the dying remains of Kenya’s original inhabitants. As was often the case, the name used for them was not their own but that of another people. They were usually called by some version of Dorobo, which comes from their Masai name ‘Il Torobo’, meaning “poor fellows”, and . . . applied by the Masai to any of the neighboring tribes who live among the woods and have no cattle. It is only a term of contempt. . . .’ (Gregory 1968: 331-332).

From the viewpoint of their neighbors (Masai, Kipsigis and Nandi in the case of the Kipchornwonek and Kaplelach Okiek), being Okiek has definite connotations of inferiority. They are considered lowly by the Masai because they do not have cattle in herds that even approach the size of their own. For people like the Masai, whose division of usable cultural space extends probably at most into the lower reaches of open forest land, the Okiek are either anomalous as people who live in the animal/nature domain or else must be animal-like themselves. Some of the stereotypic but false characteristics attributed to the Okiek by others seem to confirm this, e.g. that the Okiek eat their meat raw, or that they have tails or live in trees. These values are incorporated in the sense of the name ‘Dorobo’. But at the same time, the Okiek are the primary source of the honey necessary for Masai ceremonies in that area and they have long been the source of various herbal medicines for the Masai.

Kipsigis and Nandi are, like the Okiek, Kalenjin speakers, so they call the Okiek by their own name. But in Kipsigis and Nandi usage as well, ‘Okiek’ carries a sense of backwardness or crudeness as, for example, when contrasting their own thatched, mud-walled houses kot ap susuek (‘house of grass’, a house style that many Okiek now make use of) with the smaller bark-roofed, leaf-lined houses that Okiek once kept in several areas of their lineage territories, kot ap Okiek.

The Okiek recognize the values these terms carry for others, but more often than not manage to turn them to their own advantage. One of the implications of seeing Okiek as poor and few is that they are usually regarded as relatively harmless. ‘Just an Okiot.’ Further, these neighboring peoples most often encounter Okiek singly or in small groups, reinforcing such a view. Most older Okiek in Narok District are bilingual in Kalenjin and Masai; they at least have the rudiments of Masai down.

**Okiek Transculturality, Mediation, and Traditions**

The situation is thus set that enables Okiek to pass comfortably between cultures, in a sense, to define themselves and their interactions with neighbors in terms most appropriate to their own ease and success. Quite often this means working from what seems a courteously yielding attitude towards the choice of communicative code. I would argue,
however, that the yielding is as much or more an expression of the breadth of Okiek abilities and repertoire (and thus part of Okiek self-identity) as it is a matter of deference. In short, it is probably the case that Okiek have more experience in Masai culture, in Kipsigis culture, and—according to their vicinity—in Kikuyu culture, than these have with each other or the Okiek. Which is not at all to say that the Okiek have no culture or identity of their own, but rather that they have a more inclusive, less ethnocentric way of dealing with others.

Thus when Okiek and Masai meet on a path, pass by each other's settlements or stop to visit, communication is almost invariably conducted in the Masai language. From the Masai point of view, this might be an expression of their superiority and power over the Okiek. But for the Okiek it is not a matter of giving in, not a matter of deference but more one of ability. Masai is not a despised language for them, but neither is it a prestigious one. They can and do speak Masai; in fact, in certain situations with only Okiek participants Masai carries a particular sense of Okiek-ness. It is the medium for at least one type of song that is regarded as quintessentially Okiek. Thus by speaking Masai in interactions an Okiet is not necessarily compromising himself or his Okiek-ness, as might easily be supposed.

Again, in a large town Okiek sometimes find it easier and to their advantage to call themselves Masai or Kipsigis if called upon by officialdom to identify themselves ethnically for some reason. For instance, I asked the head medical officer of the government hospital in Narok about Okiek admissions and their use of government health facilities in the district and was told with great certainty that not a single Okiet had yet visited the hospital during his tenure there of several years. I knew of several who were either in the hospital at the time or had just recently been released, and asked about this after returning home. One of them told me that he had called himself Okiek but sometimes would say Kipsigis to people at the hospital, and anyway they would sometimes just write down Kipsigis or Masai (Olkeri: 30 December 1974).

While the practice of calling themselves by other ethnic names facilitates interaction with those who are not fully concerned with the ethnic distinctions, or eases movement through official channels, it also perpetuates Okiek stereotypes and adds to the vagueness of ideas others hold of the Okiek. When others do not really know who the Okiek are, or who is Okiek, interactions and communication proceed on the individual level with the possibility of more open cultural boundaries.

Being Okiek, then, includes a sense of being mediator, code-switcher, interstitial. Assuming that at one point all the Okiek groups were living together, it seems that the historical experience of their dispersion has added a particular dimension to each group's identity and emphasized or developed an ease and flexibility in dealing with other cultures. The incorporation and elaboration of a variety of communicative and symbolic
possibilities seem to be part of an Okiek definition of themselves vis-à-vis other cultural groups. The main Okiek tradition of stories centers around the trickster type figure of the rabbit (*kiplekawet*) who I think also embodies and exemplifies a number of these Okiek ways of dealing with others. *Kiplekawet* emphasizes cleverness and an adaptability that does not demean but rather enriches cultural possibilities and maintains personal and group integrity.

**Okiek Self-Identification**

A very important part of Okiek identity, of course, is generated within Okiek communities, in interaction with other Okiek. It is clear that the Okiek are not clinging to others groups as serfs or economic failures but are inhabiting cultural boundary areas as their own. The forest areas where Okiek live and their way of conceptualizing and inhabiting that space strike one of the deepest chords in the Okiek sense of themselves. The forest and the life of the forest run through Okiek life symbolically, ceremonially and economically. The division and rights to land are important aspects of the two social groupings that operate internally among the Okiek, the patrilineage (*kap*) and the local group.3

The other major Okiek social groups, age-sets and clans (*ipinda* and *oret*) are shared in their general form with certain Okiek neighbors; their relative importance varies from one Okiek group to another according to the way they articulate with the social structural divisions of those neighbors. The Okiek also feel themselves part of a larger and looser affiliation, that of Kalenjin peoples, based on linguistic and cultural affinities. This is a more recent alliance that took shape as part of an effort to build a political awareness and unity (Ojany & Ogendo 1973: 12). There is no unique Okiek word for ‘tribe’ other than the Swahili loan of *habila* or the general word for people, *piik*. The word for all the local groups taken together, however, is Okiek, and there is a definite sense of what it is to be Okiek.

Okiek oral traditions do not reach back to a time when they lived united. On the basis of glottochronology and the oral historical evidence of other peoples, however, it seems that this was most certainly the case prior to about 1000 A.D. Northwestern Kenya seems most probable as the area where they were then living, possibly around the Uasin Gishu plateau (Ehret 1971). The Okiek seem to be aware that there are other Okiek living in various parts of Kenya, even though they may have been separated for hundreds of years. All share an identification of themselves as the original inhabitants of Kenya. The traditions of other peoples corroborate their claim, although whether they were actually autochthonous or just among the very earliest of the Nilotic or

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3. There is no general Okiek word for local group but rather specific names of such groupings of lineages such as Kaplech, Omotik, etc. See Blackburn 1971 and Kratz 1977 for more complete descriptions of social structure.
Cushitic migrations cannot yet be verified. Such common recognition of historical connection, however vague, is an important element in Okiek identity and may be related to certain shared and seemingly distinctive Okiek artifacts.

Since that time, Okiek groups have been dispersed and lived as close neighbors to other peoples, and the local group has been the basic historical unit. The distinctive history of each local group, its migrations and its interactions with different neighboring peoples give rise to a number of expressions of Okiek-ness. While all the Okiek groups probably could not be mobilized into unified action, Okiek nonetheless recognize a number of commonalities that unite the groups. It is in the way that Okiek groups draw on and express these attributes as themes and organizing principles that Okiek identity is created. The tightly packed meanings of key Okiek symbols, such as the mabwaita structure or honey, are unfolded and enfolded in more quotidian pursuits. They are clear not only in the practices and statements shared by Okiek groups and identified as distinctive, but have also been worked into the practices that were originally borrowed in interactions with their neighbors. It is instructive and essential, then, to look closely not just at the broad outlines to identify them as borrowed or as networks for intercultural relations, but to see how the details of contrast and comparison as well express the distinctions of being Okiek.

The forest has already been mentioned as the place the Okiek regard as their domain, contrasting sharply with their neighbors' spatial understandings. Closely related to the space itself is the way the Okiek make their life in it, by hunting and gathering honey. All Okiek continue these activities, although in some cases not to the same extent as previously. Their products—meat and honey—are the foods Okiek most value. Furthermore, the exchange and consumption of honey (in the form of honey wine) is an important aspect of Okiek relations with Masai and with others in market towns, for many Okiek sell or trade as much as a third of their annual crop of honey.4

**Skills and Lore**

Hunting exploits, skills and the lore of forest animals are common conversational topics, as are the progress of the annual cycle of honey flowerings and the taste and attributes of various honeys. Materially this focus is expressed in a number of artifacts that the Okiek make and use which their neighbors do not. Many are related to their life in the forest, for examples hives, special spears for elephant hunting (*kirokto*), hide forest capes for men (*arguriok*), and a type of adze used in making hives (*kisinjot*). Okiek houses are often like those of their neighbors

4. The rest is either eaten as food or brewed into honey wine (*rotik*) for home consumption or ceremonies.
now, but many Kaplelach Okiek still keep several Okiek-style houses (kot ap Okiek) in the higher forest for use on their trips there. When Okiek move, they usually live in this type of house until they can construct the more permanent thatched type. And at home the Okiek have a kind of honey basket (palaito) of their own and a style of pottery that others do not make. In fact this pottery is quite similar to that found in archaeological excavations of Sirikwa holes in the area of the Uasin Gishu plateau (Blackburn 1973). Supported by oral traditions it establishes a material link to the time before Okiek groups were dispersed.

As Okiek claim these handicrafts as their own, so too there are certain types of verbal lore that they consider Okiek, most especially a number of songs. Several that are considered particularly Okiek are about hunting big animals, or praise and enumerate the singer’s hives. Tunes played on the tureret, a flutelike instrument of the Okiek, express themes such as ‘The Drones Are Flying’, ‘Friend, Bring Me Liquid Honey, the Pure One’, and ‘The Grey Pigs Are Going’. The Okiek say that the tureret, made from a forest sapling (saporiti), evokes the feeling of the forest. The Okiek musical repertoire includes songs they told me were Nandi or Kipsigis and age-set songs whose melodies they share with Masai. Songs are most often sung during drinking occasions, and the Okiek songs, especially the Elephant Song, arouse strong feelings among those present.

The Elephant Song is the one mentioned previously which is regarded above all others as the Okiek song. Yet it is always, to my knowledge, sung in the Masai language. This seems paradoxical because a Kalenjin home language is another unifying element for the Okiek, wherever they live. I do not know the extent of distribution of the Elephant Song beyond those Okiek on the Mau. It might well be an elaboration of Okiek themes that belongs only to these groups. Nonetheless, in such a seeming contradiction other aspects of Okiek identity are brought together.

The Elephant Song is about brave Okiek hunters in the forest, yet it is sung in a language that emphasizes the Okiek’s place as a minority group and their ability to move between cultures without compromising or losing sight of their identity. The same process can also be seen in the use of Masai in ritual benedictions close to half the time. In this way they invest the language and culture of others with part of themselves. I have suggested that this side of the Okiek and their historical experience as dispersed have become special aspects of what it is to be Okiek.

Age-set songs are also sung in Masai. Once again, a local sense of

5. Megan Bieseke told me of an interesting analogy: there is a !Kung elephant song much of which is in a neighboring Bantu language. The !Kung usually go north into Bantu-speaking areas when they hunt elephants; the Okiek usually go to soyua, the open low altitude forest that is the transition zone from the plains and which other people like the Masai do frequent at times.

6. A full analysis of this aspect of Okiek self-expression would also consider songs sung but identified as Kipsigis or Nandi for contrasts and comparisons. Space does not permit this here.
affiliation can be created and expressed in the singing of these songs because their content names and praises particular warriors. When Okiek sing them, then, even in Masai, the songs celebrate or recall the times shared by particular groups of Okiek while they are or were young.

These social and temporal age-set divisions are shared by the Okiek and their neighbors. The age-set system is a cross-cutting organization that unites different peoples. It is at the same time the basis for strong identifications with particular localized groups who shared the experience of maturing and initiation, and with whom daily life is still shared. Age-set songs exemplify both sides of the social grouping—the melodies of an age's songs are shared, but each local cluster of young people sings about themselves and their friends.

_Ceremonies and Ceremonial Similarities_

The age-set system is based on a common view of the general stages of individual growth. At the most important transition from child to social adult the ceremonial cycles of Okiek, Masai and Kipsigis coincide. As is the case in choice of communicative code, the Okiek are able to work their understanding of initiation and its status transitions against and within the general shared sense as expressed by others. It is sometimes the case, for example, that Okiek will send their children to a nearby Masai or Kipsigis settlement to take part in an initiation ceremony being held there. The opposite is rarely, if ever, the case. This creative process is apparent in Okiek initiations as well; in fact within that setting it is clear that different Okiek groups are also defining their experiences and images against each other partly in terms of their encounters with other peoples.

The comparison of particular initiation ceremonies at different settlements and Okiek statements about them provides an example of the way Okiek combine these themes and variations to create an identity within and against the context of intercultural encounter. I attended four complete initiation ceremonies, three of them for girls, each held in a different place. They followed a general pattern and order of ritual events but no two were exactly alike in ritual procedures.

Okiek judge the quality of ceremonies mainly in terms of satisfactory amounts and distribution of drinks and food. They also have opinions about the ritual forms and performances of each ceremony as being more or less 'like Masai' or 'like Kipsigis' ones. There was a range in the degree of Kipsigis similarities among three of the four ceremonies, but as a group they were distinguished from the fourth one, held at Lemek in October 1974. Small, unfamiliar ritual additions and deletions were usually cited in judgements of the ceremony, especially the way the ceremony was performed. One Kipchornwonek Okiot was prompted by these differences to remark at Lemek, 'This is Masai work, not Okiek. The only thing about this ceremony that is Okiek is the mabwaita' (Lemek: 1 October 1974).
That ‘only thing’, however, the *mabwakita*, is a symbolic and ritual structure that carries in its materials and construction the plan for defining the major center of ritual space and the general outline of most Okiek ceremonies. Ritual additions and deletions are hung on a framework defined by the *mabwakita* and the ritual events that center on it.

The Omotik Okiek who hosted the ceremony had lived adjacent to the Kipchornwonek prior to the age of *il peles*, around the 1860’s, and still maintain kinship and marital ties with them. At present they live near Lemek with a group of Masai, have more cattle than most Okiek and often speak Masai at home although they still know Kalenjin. There were one or two basic differences in ritual structure between the Lemek ceremony and the others, including the treatment and seclusion of initiates after the ceremony, but on the whole it followed the general Okiek pattern.

It seems that the Omotik Okiek and those from the Mau live in the stream of influence of different popular styles that originate with Masai and Kipsigis respectively. Thus when someone says ‘That’s like Kipsigis’ or ‘That’s Masai work’, the comment is not denying that the actors or the events are Okiek but recognizing different styles for the expression and enactment of that identity. This is admittedly a largely intuitive understanding of style, but I think it adds significantly to comprehending the apparent cultural diversity and mix in much of Okiek expressive life. In initiation ceremonies these differences can be seen most clearly in songs and in the way initiates are dressed.

Starting several days before the ceremony at Lemek began, people would gather in the evening to sing. Women sang ceremony songs together outside while the girls to be initiated danced. They sang some songs in Omotik, said to be the language of this group before Kalenjin but now known only to older Omotik. They also sang a number of songs for women and ceremonies in Kalenjin. My interpreter remarked at one point, ‘They try to sing these Kalenjin songs, but they don’t know them very well’ (Lemek: 29 September 1974). My untrained ear couldn’t detect the shortcomings he was referring to. It might be, however, that he was commenting on what seemed stylistic inadequacies to his Kipchornwonek taste. Later in the evening men and women crowded into the house to sing not only these same songs but also Masai ones from their area. Some were unfamiliar to my interpreter and he was at something of a loss, only able to sing the rhythmic background sounds.

Just before the ceremony, Yangoi—a lively, compelling older woman, an excellent singer and related to the family sponsoring the ceremony—had to push women into singing the ceremony songs instead of these others. ‘Don’t just sing Masai songs; those aren’t songs for hyrax.’ She received help from another woman, ‘Sing your own songs. All you sing are Masai songs. We have our own songs that aren’t Kipsigis’ (Lemek: 1 October 1974).

There is a clear contrast to the use of Kipsigis initiation songs on the
Mau not only musically but also as regards the identity of the singers. Among the Kipchornwonek Okiek, probably the most influenced by Kipsigis style, other young girls sing the songs while initiates dance and whistle or else they act as a chorus while initiates sing farewell to friends and relatives. The girls had practiced these songs and dances for months, gathering outside in the evening. During those sessions the lyrics were about the places where the girls lived, about their families and friends. During the ceremonies the intent of the songs was similar to that of the ones sung at Lemek, dwelling on the ceremony at hand, sorrow at separation and the need to be brave during initiation. The Kipchornwonek girls knew a number of ‘Kipsigis’ songs that were not sung at Lemek. The dances that accompany Kipsigis and Masai style songs are also quite different.

It took me some time to recognize these as differences in the style of performance rather than differences in the nature of expressive forms. This was so for a number of reasons. First, I was living in an area where the Kipsigis-Kalenjin style was stressed and elaborated over the Masai one, although both were known. In this situation the Masai influence was seen as being somehow less Okiek. Daniel Crowley discusses a similar situation for Chokwe art in Zaire. People ‘prefer the local style to all others, which they usually describe as “old-fashioned”, “of the bush,” or “not modern like ours’’’ (1975: 246). Further, Kipsigis is a more urban-oriented style. Kipsigis popular songs recorded on 45 rpm records in western Kenya were turning up at initiations by 1975, for example, and many of the Kipsigis style additions to initiations had to do with material goods.

Against this it was all too easy to see the Kipsigis style as the way Okiek were responding to the diffusionary influx of Western culture, and to see the Masai style as assimilation or change to a tradition conceptualized in terms of the ‘tribal’ isolate. This implied the sort of static, unchanging view of Masai (reinforced by the frequent presentation by colonial literature of Masai as proudly and strongly resistant to change) that I was unwilling to admit for the Okiek. I was being double ethnocentric: first, in looking at cultural change chiefly as it related to Western influences (though steered to this bias by the literature on social change), and second, in the approach to Masai from an Okiek orientation as just outlined. Beneath both ran a view of ceremonial or cultural complexes as mutually exclusive, all-or-nothing allegiances.

My inability to discern the stylistic variation in Masai-style songs added to the difficulties. Age-set songs finally helped me to see popular changes in Masai music, although I have yet to understand how this type of popular music is created, moves through its young audience-performers, and then how just a few of the songs of the age are remembered and sung by age-set members for the rest of their lives.

The decoration and dress of initiates also follow one of these Okiek styles of ceremonial performance. The dressing of initiates maintains
the same place in ceremonial structure, immediately following the head-shaving of initiates in the evening of the first day of the ceremony. In the Masai way, adults approach the initiate and each puts beaded jewelry on her ‘to make her beautiful’, at the same time admonishing her and exhorting her to have a strong heart. ‘Everyone will watch you tomorrow. If you’re cut and you run, we’ll catch you and beat you. If you cry people will laugh’ (Lemek: 2 October 1974).

The Kipsigis manner of handling this part of the ceremony, like the songs, gives the young people a more active role. Each initiate is decorated by a young man who gathered a costume that includes colobus monkey skins, shoes and socks, a man’s shirt, a brightly colored khanga cloth and other items. Under Kipsigis influence, young men also decorate the ceremonial house with a combination of brightly colored items from a more urbanized African culture. Once costumed the girls continue to dance for some time and then enter their parents’ homes for the same sort of exhortations from adults. It seems as if the Masai combination of actions, i.e. the simultaneous decoration of the initiate and urgent delivery of adult advice and warnings, has been separated and elaborated in the Kipsigis manner of performance. In both cases the decorations are removed as soon as the initiate is cut the following morning. Another decoration is included in the very last part of initiations on the Mau, this time in full traditional garb of beaded skirt and beaded jewelry. This takes place during the coming out of seclusion six months later.

The Masai modality is more clearly a stylistic overlay on Okiek ceremonies because they do not share many basic ceremonial structures. Kipsigis and Okiek ones are much closer. The mabwaita shrine, for instance, is included in Kalenjin ceremonial similarities. But even though the form is shared with other Kalenjin speakers, the materials and ceremonial construction of a mabwaita by Okiek articulate the themes and experiences of Okiek identity.

Okiek pointed out to me, for example, that when Kipsigis gather koroswik saplings for initiations they wrap sinentet vines around the bases. Further, although the sapling is called by the same name, it is a different type of tree. Kipsigis koroswik are from trees that grow by the river, while an Okiet would only take the type of kuresiot that grows in the forest. As the types of vines and trees that the Kipsigis use in their mabwaita are not the same as Okiek ones, neither are their symbolic meanings and ceremonial uses identical. For the Okiek the mabwaita condenses and recreates the signification of their spatial categories, their hunting and honey gathering life within those domains and the complementary meanings of maleness and femaleness that pervade that life.7

Okiek identity is created and clarified in interaction with and against

7. See KRATZ 1977, Chapter Six for a fuller discussion of the significance of the mabwaita.
non-Okiek; it involves a comparative, outward-looking viewpoint. But
the vantage from which this view is taken is deep within a sense of
historicity and continuity in contrast to these others. ‘There were no
Masai in this country when we were children. They came recently. [. . . ]
They came and met us in this country. Okiek were the owners of this
country. Of all the tribes that have come the Masai were first, and then
recently Kipsigis, Nandi, Uasin Gishu and Tuken. They were the ones
that came, and we all lived together’ (Olkerei: 21 November 1974).

The origin and identity of the Okiek are tied together by the multiple
expressions and enactment of Okiek themes, styles and history in their
present experience. Themes that express the distinctiveness of the
Okiek as a people are incorporated not only in uniquely Okiek situations
but also in the social structures, economic relations and ceremonial
occasions and styles in terms of which the Okiek relate to their neighbors.
This process incorporates the separate experiences of Okiek local groups
into their sense of themselves and provides the means to encounter new
experiences productively. The recent formation, for example, of new
dimensions of Okiek identity as part of Kalenjin peoples or as members
of land demarcation groups are part of that process and part of the way
Okiek share in current district and national politics.

So, to return to the question posed as a title, are the Okiek really
Masai, or Kipsigis, or Kikuyu? The answer is, I think, clearly no, but
everyone, including the Okiek, wants to keep the question open and
the lines between them slightly obfuscated, requiring active participation.

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