Factors Driving Exclusion and Discrimination of Elmolo in Kenya: A Case of El Molo in Turkana County

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ABSTRACT

The indigenous peoples in Kenya face a huge hurdle in protecting their fundamental rights and freedoms due to lack recognition as distinct groups with specific needs, cultures, and ways of life. This study sought to address to identify and map the El-Molo community in Turkana County, documenting varying levels of marginalization among different demographics and understanding the structure through which the community coordinates and advocates for their rights and development. The study focused on 1,104 El Molo residents in Kalokol, Longech, and Kapua, and utilized a descriptive research design. The researcher employed key informant interviews as well as Focus Group Discussions to collect primary data. To ensure the reliability of the findings, a triangulation of methods was utilized, including interviews with local chiefs, ministry officials, and representatives of faith-based organizations in Central Turkana. During public Baraza and FGD, a checklist was used to guide the discussions. The El-Molo community, the smallest ethnic group in Kenya, is at risk of losing their distinct identity through intermarriage and the adoption of Western practices from neighbouring tribes. Without intervention, their traditional food, clothing, housing, and cultural practices will disappear. Therefore, it is crucial to expose the community to methods of preserving their heritage, including material culture, music, and dance.

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INTRODUCTION

Officially, indigenous peoples in Kenya have not been recognized as distinct or indigenous, resulting in their exclusion from policy processes, ineffective consultation in development, and becoming victims of assimilation, their hurdles due to lack of recognition ranges from a lack of official recognition, ineffective consultation in development, and deliberate exclusion, leading to their vulnerability, marginalization, and decline of their traditional way of life. Kenya is said to comprise of 42 tribes according to official sources, however this number excludes Ogiek, El Molo, Watta, Munyayaya, and Yakuu, among others who were pastoralists and hunter-gatherer communities. This exclusion could be traced to the colonial administrative approach of assimilating smaller communities into dominant groups, resulting in their diminished visibility and exclusion from national policymaking and budget allocations (International Labour Organization, 2009).

In Kenya, the El Molo tribe, inhabits the Southeastern shores of Lake Turkana and is facing endangerment as competition for the lake's resources increases. According to Keitumetse (2006), the El-Molo language is critically endangered and only spoken by a few members of the oldest generation. Linguist Krauss (2007) also classifies the El Molo and Suba languages as moribund since they are no longer spoken by children. The receding water levels, prolonged drought, and insecurity in the region have made the El Molo tribe even more vulnerable, as their main source of livelihood, fishing, is threatened. Unlike their neighbouring tribes, such as the Turkanas, Pokots, and Samburus, the El Molo tribe is the only one in the Northeastern part of Kenya that solely depends on fishing from Lake Turkana for survival.

The El Molo community’s dependence on the lake has had adverse effects on their health due to an imbalanced protein-rich diet and excessive fluoride consumption. As a result, they have become more susceptible to diseases and attacks from stronger tribes over the centuries (Krauss, 2007). The lack of official recognition, ineffective consultation in development, and deliberate exclusion have left the El Molo tribe vulnerable, marginalized, and at risk of losing their traditional way of life.

"The El Molo population include outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, smallpox and malaria that claim scores of lives at a time when medical facilities are inaccessible" Today, it is rare to find an El Molo man older than 60 years [Wycliffe Oloo, anthropologist with National Museum of Kenya,]

Throughout Kenya's history, minority communities have faced various forms of marginalization, including social, political, and economic exclusion. This marginalization was perpetuated after the Kenya got independence where the government policies and blue prints such as sessional paper number 10 of 1965 prioritized economic growth over resource redistribution, leading to significant disparities and further marginalization. According to report by NGEC (2013), these inequalities were inherited from the Kenya's colonial legacy and have posed a threat to national unity and social cohesion due to their alignment with ethnic, religious, and economic divisions.

The Society for International Development (2004) in a Report titled Pulling Apart: Facts and Figures on inequality in Kenya revealed that differences in well-being across different regions in Kenya were primarily driven by ethnic differences, as each ethnic group typically resides in a specific geographic area. According to Kanyinga (2006), the North Eastern Kenya’s population consists of linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities, with distinct languages, traditional lifestyles, cultural traditions, and self-identities that set them apart from 42 dominant tribes in the country. This minority status is further compounded by their
desire to maintain their unique practices and ways of life, which can often clash with the dominant Kenya Culture.

While some counties in Kenya have a mix of religious groups, Mandera County stands out with over 98% of its population professing the Islamic Religion while the majority of Kenyan population are Christians. Furthermore, even among the Islamic dominated counties in Kenya, there are certain minority groups facing additional discrimination and marginalization. (NGEC 20130

Problem Statement

Kenya is a country with a rich diversity, home to 48 different tribes spread across 47 counties. Within its borders, there are 98 marginalized or minority communities, comprising 9.3% of the total population (Mohochi, 2021). These communities unable to fully participate in the socio-economic life of the country due to their small size or preservation of unique cultures and identities. This includes traditional communities that have chosen to remain outside of mainstream society, indigenous communities that maintain a traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and marginalized communities that have been geographically isolated and excluded from the rest of the country.

According to KIPPRA (2010), a discussion paper on Determinants of Regional Disparity in Kenya, regional disparity is still a major development challenge in Kenya, despite government efforts to reduce through ambitious programmes such as Youth Enterprise Fund, National Government Affirmative Action Fund and even Women Enterprise Fund among others to promote regional socioeconomic empowerment and production since that regional production defines the relative state of a region’s welfare. This study sought to identify and map factors driving exclusion and discrimination of Elmolo in accounting for regional disparity in Kenya. These factors include literacy level, proportion of members of parliament in government, availability of security services, and proportion of arable land, electricity connection, and access to medical care, financial services, portable water, quality communication and transport infrastructure.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to determine the exclusions and discrimination factors driving discrimination of Elmolo in Kenya.

Objectives of the study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To determine levels of exclusion and discrimination amongst the El Molo community.
- To determine factors driving exclusion and discrimination of the El Molo Community

Rationale and Justification of the study

Despite the advancements in Kenya's political and legal framework, which guarantees the inclusion of minority and marginalized communities through devolution, there are still ongoing concerns. It is hoped that the findings of this study will catalyse the process of policy making and initiating of affirmative action programmes towards addressing inequalities, disparities, and marginalization within and between regions and ethnic groups. It is hoped that this study will be significant to the policy makers both at National and developed government together with relevant stakeholder in establishing a balanced social and economic foundation for the new political dispensation.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive research design. The sample size of 302 was determined by Kerjecie Morgan Table Kapua. The study employed face to face interviews, group discussions, and stakeholders' workshops in order to collect the primary data. A total of 295 respondents participated in the study, out of these 175 were part of focus group discussions (109 youth and 66 women) 10 key informants from the national government, 36 county government
officials, and 8 key informers. The majority of households surveyed reported having a family size of four to six people. A significant percentage of household members (53.5% to 60.3%) were under 20 years old, indicating a high dependency ratio.

**Demographic, Social, Cultural and Political Characteristics of El Molo**

A total of 272 individuals were directly involved in the study, either through one-on-one interviews or by participating in public forums, focused group discussions, and/or stakeholders' workshops. Of these, 175 were part of focus group discussions, with 109 being youth and 66 being women. Additionally, 10 key informants from the National Government, 36 county government officials, and 8 key informers were interviewed. Most of the households surveyed had a family size of four to six members. The majority (53.5% to 60.3%) of household members were under the age of 20, indicating a high dependency ratio. Furthermore, 42.8% to 47.5% of those interviewed were female.

It was discovered that the El Molo community is not purely homogenous, as they have intermarried with Samburu and Turkana people, resulting in a mixture of cultural practices. This has contributed to an increase in their population, as they have adopted customs from both tribes. According to the location Chief, the original homeland of the El Molo is unknown, with some claiming they originated from Somalia and other tribes. From the foregoing El Molo community risk losing its distinct identity. Mr. Richard Smaron, the Headteacher of Elmolo Primary School, supports this concern.

*With the intermarriages between the El Molo and Samburu and Turkana people there is an increased chance of extinction of the El molo community. Samburu language due to assimilation and inter-marriages*.  

The findings of this study corroborate that of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in their atlas on endangered languages that revealed El Molo is one of the languages on the brink of extinction. Despite being widely spoken during colonial and pre-colonial times, El Molo is now mainly spoken by the Samburu, a Nilotic language, in parts of Rift Valley along the shores of Lake Turkana and the surrounding semi-arid desert area. UNESCO states that there are approximately 199 languages with less than ten speakers and 178 with 10 to 50 speakers, and they fear that these numbers may have decreased even further due to the passing of elderly speakers.

**Cultural and Gender Barriers**

The tradition and culture of El Molo people revolves around their religious beliefs. All the respondents confirmed that they adhere to traditional religion deeply rooted in the worship of Waaq. Through their reverence for Waaq the community expresses profound connection with natural world and the spiritual significance they attribute to it. However, it was also evident that some individuals have embraced Christianity while preserving their cultural heritage. The coexistence of traditional beliefs and Christianity within the community reflected the dynamic nature of nature of culture and ElMolo’s willingness to embrace change while maintaining many of their traditional customs and way of life. The community, therefore, retains aspects of a distant past that no longer exists today. Although these people identify themselves as pure El-molo, their contacts with other tribes in the region, significantly Turkana and Samburu, have clearly diluted this identity. There are no sanctions against marriage outside the group. Many El-molo women are married off to men from other tribes. Men from outside the tribe can pay the bride price easily. However, not many women from other tribes are marrying into the community, as most El-molo men cannot afford the bride's wealth.

The culture of the Communities in Lake Turkana is male dominated. For example,
among the El-Molo, a four-year-old boy's opinion is considered relatively high to that of a 25-year-old woman. In some places where the consultations were done, elders did not permit women to speak in Barazas, although there was no problem listening to women consultants. However, in case of classified information relating to either gender, it was necessary to separate women from men.

From the interviews and observations, it was established that the majority of the households relied exclusively on fresh or dried fish for their food. However, they incorporate other foods provided to them by the Kenyan government through relief agencies, such as maize, beans, lentils, soybeans, flour, and cooking oil. These items have become essential to these people, as they have nothing else to supplement their basic diet.

Factors Driving Exclusion and Discrimination of the El Molo Community

Through meetings with the County governments, community leaders and community members, the researcher gathered and documented historical and current factors perpetuating marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination among the El Molo. They maintain much of their traditional culture, being an independent ethnic group. The El Molo is not under any dominant society and hence has its own culture, some of which are known to be very unique. For instance, they have Laji and Arapile's systems of governance. They have two arms of governance. The Laji (age set) also has two governance arms, which include Karichir and Marsara. On the other hand, Arapile is the leader of each group. The two (Karichir & Marsara) have a president and the other three leaders as heads; the other elders are members and committees. Boys are incorporated into the system through the right of passage. The functions of Laji are;

- Organizing community rituals
- Resolving community issues
- Punish errant members of society
- Guard for rights of the community and ritual sites of Moite, Lorien, and Kaldera Island in Lake Turkana

These factors varied by the community and within the community members, variations were significant among youth, persons with disability, elderly, and women.

Poverty

From the interviews and observations, it was established that the majority of the households relied exclusively on fresh or dried fish for their food. However, they incorporate other foods provided to them by the Kenyan government through relief agencies, such as maize, beans, lentils, soybeans, flour, and cooking oil. These items have become essential to these people, as they have nothing else to supplement their basic diet. This implied that their staple food and source of livelihood has dwindled over time and consequently their economic activity since El-Molo's life is based on fishing for subsistence and supply to the markets in Kenya and other neighbouring countries. A key informant from Akicha Pastrolest Empowerment Initiative (APEI, a community Based Organization in Turkana County recounted that the fish supply of fish from Lake Turkana has reduced in the last five years, this subsequently has made the El Molo People vulnerable to poverty and poor health due to lack of stable income.

It was evident that El Molo eke out an existence in an environment that offers them few resources beyond the doum palm, stones, thorny bushes and the brackish waters. This study is in line with Nayaran et al, (2000) who postulated that poverty has many dimensions that go beyond income. Poverty also encompasses deprivation, lack of access to social services and lack of participation in political, social and cultural institutions and decision making.

Identity Dilemma

In group discussions in Ilima and Longech, the participants unanimously agreed that most Elmolo
are not "pure" El Molo since they have been assimilated by their neighbours, the Samburu, Rendille and the Turkana from intermarriages. This implied that the El Molo continue to grapple with collective communal identity.

Furthermore, it was established that there are no sanctions against marriage outside the El-Molo, as was the case in the past. Many El Molo women are married off to men from other tribes. Men from outside the tribe can pay the bride price easily. However, not many women from other tribes are marrying into the community, as most El-molo men cannot afford the bride's wealth. Therefore, it was established that the El Molo Community was co-opted in larger ethnic arrangements or even assimilation by the numerically dominant community in their neighbourhood. Previous analysis of the communities in this category showed that they occupied the lowest levels of any human development index. Several Kenyan communities such as the Munyoyaya, Elwana, Dasnaach, Okiek, Elchumus, Segeju, Sakweri, Elmolo, Sabaot, Terek, Sengwer, Nubi, Boni, Sakuye, Waata and others were still awaiting official recognition.

Political Exclusion and Discrimination
Exclusion and discrimination in politics are major issues in Kenya, as revealed by the unanimous agreement of the Focused Group Discussions. The dominant groups use their numbers to gain power and push the numerically non-dominant groups to the fringes of political representation and decision-making. This has been observed in Turkana County, where the Turkana community has been favoured for representation while the El Molo community, with significantly lower numbers, has been excluded from any of the sixteen positions in the recent 2022 general election.

CONCLUSION
This discrimination is fuelled by the strong lineage system of the Turkana community, which easily identifies and isolates the descendants of the El Molo to preserve their perceived purity. Unfortunately, this discriminatory attitude continues to affect the El Molo community in the modern era.

The study has revealed that two major themes, poverty and ethnicity, are crucial in understanding discrimination and inequality in Kenya. These issues have a significant impact on the lives of many individuals, as they face multiple forms of discrimination due to various aspects of their identity. Throughout the research, it was found that most individuals who reported experiencing discrimination or inequality were either impoverished or from a particular ethnic group, even though these factors were not the cause, perpetuator, or exacerbator of their disadvantage. Poverty, inequality, and discrimination are interconnected, often in complex and mutually reinforcing ways. Conversely, discrimination can also cause poverty, with various groups, such as women, people with disabilities, and indigenous communities, falling into poverty due to discrimination based on their status.

REFERENCE


