

Kenya

Connecting Past and Present: Changing Landscapes in the Embobut Forest, Western Kenya

Sam Lunn-Rockliffe
University of Oxford
[samuel.lunn-rockliffe@st-hughs.
ox.ac.uk](mailto:samuel.lunn-rockliffe@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk)

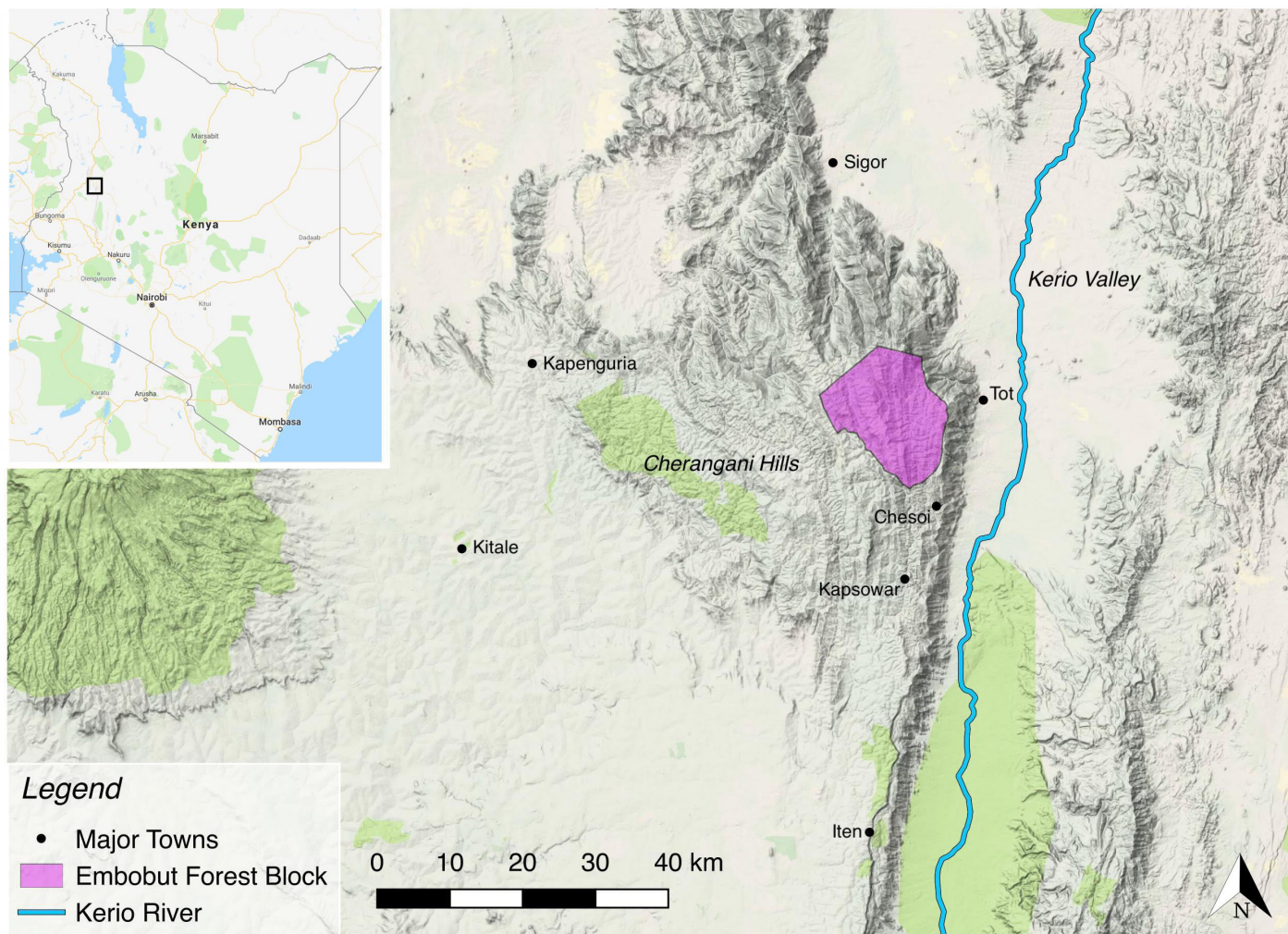
This paper provides a preliminary report of a project that explores the contemporary archaeology of the Sengwer communities living in the Embobut Forest in the Cherangani Hills, northwest Kenya. My research took place in the sequence of a complicated and contested narrative of landscape modification over the past century. Different perspectives on this case study illustrate how landscape changes are not only caused by shifting livelihoods of its residents, but also due to the imposition of conservation boundaries by the colonial Forest Department in the early twentieth century. These boundaries ultimately resulted in continued attempts by the Kenyan government to evict communities from the forest, leading to a legal case that hinged upon issues of conservation and claims to ‘indigeneity’. In particular, community activists have been attempting to re-assert their right to live in the Embobut forest by drawing upon a range of historical and cultural ideas that demonstrate the importance of the relationship they bear with their landscape. Unfortunately, realising these aims has been hindered by a lack of wider intellectual interest, since academic studies have yet to explore in detail the history, archaeology or ethnography of the Sengwer. Consequently, my research has involved working with communities living in the Embobut Forest in order to conduct a diachronic analysis of how they have constructed their landscape and engaged with the forest environment through time.

Conceptualising African ‘Indigeneity’

The conceptual foundations of being ‘indigenous’ are highly contested, with some anthropologists rejecting its use, arguing that it connotes essentialist ideas of culture and facilitates the employment of ‘privileged rights’ for particular populations (Suzman 2002; Kuper 2003). Others have argued that if ‘indigeneity’ is separated from its essentialist roots it can be understood as a relational term that pivots upon the issues of power and dispossession, acting as an important legal term and political tool to protect distinct cultural groups who have become marginalised (Kenrick and Lewis 2004; Barnard 2006; Gausset *et al.* 2011). Whilst this debate is directly reflected in archaeological discourse surrounding the validity of ‘Indigenous Archaeologies’ (Atalay 2006; McGhee 2008; Colwell-Chanthaphonh *et al.* 2010; Wilcox 2010; Lane 2014), it is hard to ignore the fact that ‘indigeneity’ as a concept has become ruptured from its theoretical foundations and firmly placed within international legislation. Indeed, in 2007, the UN passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, cementing the importance of ‘Indigenous People’ as a category in international law and further endorsing its regular use by international bodies such as the World Bank.

Definitions of ‘indigeneity’, however, still remain multifaceted depending on when and where the term is employed. For example, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) is hesitant to use commonly accepted concepts of ‘aboriginality’ or ‘autochthony’ as a benchmark for who is ‘indigenous’, not least because of the complexities behind the fluidity of identity over the *longue durée*, group migration, the departure of colonial powers and the subsequent renegotiation of ethnic identities in post-colonial Africa (ACHPR 2006; Lynch 2006; 2011; Lane 2011; 2014). According to ACHPR, a more important fulcrum for recognising ‘Indigenous Peoples’ in Africa is the connection between culturally distinct and marginalised people to their landscapes.

In this vein, methods of analysing ‘indigeneity’ must examine the relationships between humans and the material landscape as well as vegetation/plants, animals, and the localisation of daily practices within wider understandings of place (Ingold 2000; Tilley 2006; Balée 2013). By engaging with built environment of Embobut, I aim to contribute to recent studies that examine the archaeology of the contemporary past (Buchli and Lucas 2001) and ex-



Data Sources: QGIS; Google Maps; UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2018), Protected Planet: Embobut Forest; The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA)/The Global Database on Protected Areas Management Effectiveness (GD-PAME)] [On-line], Cambridge, UK: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN. Available at: www.protectedplanet.net.

Figure 1: Location of the Cherangani Hills in western Kenya.

plore how Sengwer identities are grounded in the materiality of the Embobut landscape itself. Harrison and Schofield (2010: 6) claim that there are three specific and arguably unique perspectives that an archaeology of the contemporary past can bring to contextualising the present-day: 1) archaeological investigations bring a particular suite of methodological and theoretical tools to the study of material culture (including landscapes); 2) archaeological studies incorporate a recognition of time depth and longer-term processes; and 3) this long-term awareness facilitates a profound understanding of change. By addressing the latter point, instead of confining research questions to broad frameworks of ‘past’ and ‘present’, archaeologists can bring into focus the notion of ‘multiple temporalities’ (Lucas 2004), which examine the dynamics between different phenomena occurring at varying physical and social tem-

poralities. In light of this, my project employs a materially focused methodology that conducts a diachronic analysis how Sengwer livelihoods are entangled with multi-temporal landscapes. This is important as it shifts debates surrounding ‘indigeneity’ away from concepts of ‘autochthony’ and instead grounds them in the connectivity that people have had with the landscape through time.

Project Aims and Methodology

The debates surrounding Sengwer ‘indigeneity’ and rights to land are wrapped up in what Lynch (2016) calls ‘the politics of naming’, with ideas of identity at local, national and international levels often understood discursively with little emphasis on how identity is expressed through



Figure 2: Abandoned housing platforms in the Embobut Forest.

what people actually *do* on a day to day basis and how this has changed through time. As such, this project employed a methodology that explored how the changing nature of quotidian life is manifest in the landscape in order to shift contemporary discourse about ‘indigeneity’ away from political rhetoric and ground it in the materiality and temporality of everyday tasks.

Data collection broadly took place over two seasons totalling approximately eight months from July to November 2016 and March to May 2017, employing a combination of archaeological and anthropological methods:

Interviews with community elders explored oral histories, ethnobotany and activities of daily life. In total, I conducted forty-four interviews with the help of a Sengwer research assistant, Joseph Kimatai, who speaks the local Sengwer and Marakwet dialects.

Participant Mapping Sessions enabled the evocation of the relationship between place, lived experience and community. As such, I undertook a number of participant map-making sessions with both individuals and groups. Informants were asked to undertake pen and paper exercises with satellite imagery to discuss their environment as they perceive it. The chief aim of these sessions was to use the process of map-making as an interview technique to evoke memories and stimulate explanations.

Landscape Mapping and Archaeological Surveys informed by the interviews and participant mapping sessions saw the mapping of points and tracks with community members. Of importance was the mapping of abandoned homesteads in three historic forest glades

where people had been living. Old trackways no longer in use were marked alongside newer road networks in order to understand how people have moved through the forest and how this has changed. Detailed surveys of abandoned households provided data aimed to gauge how they have changed through time, particularly before and after the 2013 evictions.

Preliminary Findings: The Archaeology of Changing Livelihoods in Embobut

The slopes of the Cherangani Hills form an undulating upland plateau in western Kenya. Whilst the hills gently level out to the west, the eastern side falls abruptly as the Elgeyo Escarpment drops to the floor of the Kerio Valley approximately a kilometre below (Figure 1). The Embobut forest occurs between approximately 1600 and 3000 metres, distinguished by the occurrence of Red Stinkwood (*Prunus africana*), African Redwood (*Hagenia abyssinica*), Wild Olive (*Olea europaea*), East African Cedar (*Juniperus procera*) and Common Yellowwood (*Podocarpus falcatus*) (Kiage and Liu 2006; Kenya Forest Service 2015).

The region is divided into twelve forest blocks totalling 110,181.3 hectares, 21,689 hectares of which constitute the Embobut forest block (Kenya Forest Service 2015). These forest blocks were demarcated at various stages throughout the first half of the twentieth century, existing as a part of Colonial forestry policy that aimed to conserve forests in important water catchment areas (Ofcansky 1984). The conservation strategies employed for protecting forest reserves were built upon the premise that in order to preserve ecosystems, humans had to be excluded from the area. Often called ‘fortress conservation’ or the ‘fences and fines’ approach, this became the dominant model during the twentieth century (Neumann 2002). However for the populations residing in Embobut, rather than preventing change in the forest, the imposition of these very demarcations created new conservation landscapes that marked the beginning of radical change to local livelihoods in the form of resettlement schemes and evictions (Lynch 2006). Thus, the Sengwer populations who historically resided in Embobut Forest became described as ‘squatters’ illegally occupying a conservation area (Kenya Forest Service 2015: 5). The Kenya Forest Service has attempted to carry out evictions that, accord-

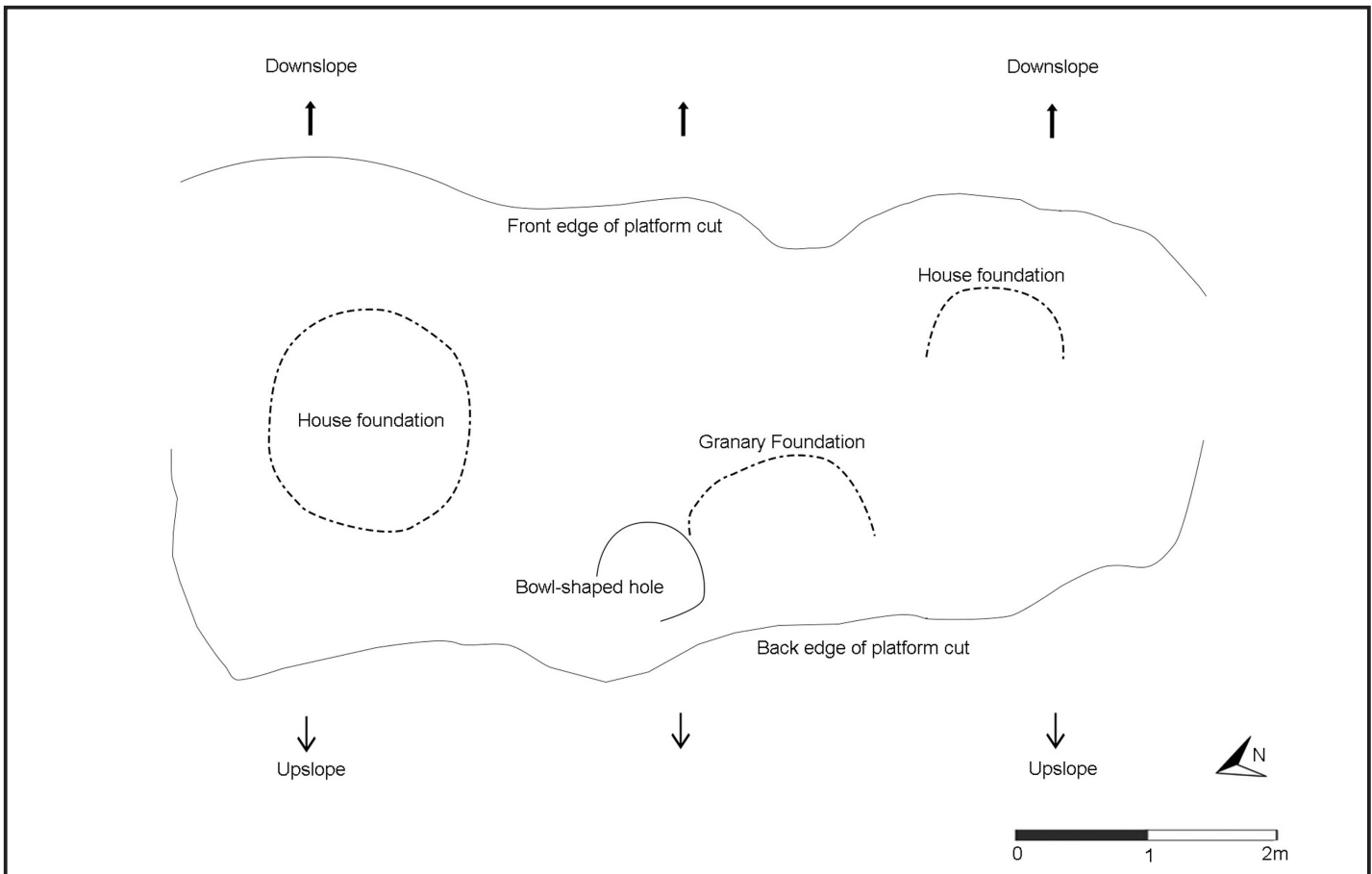


Figure 3: Survey of an abandoned housing platform.

ing to local informants, have occurred almost every year since the early 1980s. They have predominantly taken the form of burning houses and forcefully removing people from the forest block, the most recent having happened in 2013.

Consequently, as one walks through the hills of Embobut in the present-day, a patchwork of old field boundaries, terraces and house platforms can be seen etched into the hillside (Figure 2). These are the archaeological residues of former households, spaces where individuals and family units carried out the tasks of everyday life. Figure 3 depicts a platform that was abandoned at the time of the 2013 evictions, displaying partial evidence of two houses and a collapsed granary. According to informants, the houses were typically bamboo wattle-and-daub structures, one traditionally belonging to the man and the other to his wife (see Moore 1986). Prior to the 1960s, houses were usually located close to the Embobut River, but when people started cultivating (see below),

platforms were built on the higher hill slopes where there was more space to plant crops.

The abandoned homesteads belonged to both Sengwer and Marakwet populations, the latter constituting the majority of the population across the Elgeyo Marakwet County and the Cherangani Hills (the notion that the Marakwet and Sengwer have been living side by side in the forest poses complex questions surrounding ‘indigeneity’ in Embobut that are reserved for future analysis). Community elders from both groups describe how their ancestors migrated into the area approximately 250 years ago particularly from the plains of Uasin Gishu to the west, choosing to reside in small grassy clearings surrounded by forest vegetation scattered throughout the highlands. In Embobut, the Sengwer state that they were then living in three of these clearings, more commonly referred to as glades, called Koropkwen, Kaptirbai and Kapkok. Within these forest clearings, people kept small herds of cattle that would graze on the open grassland

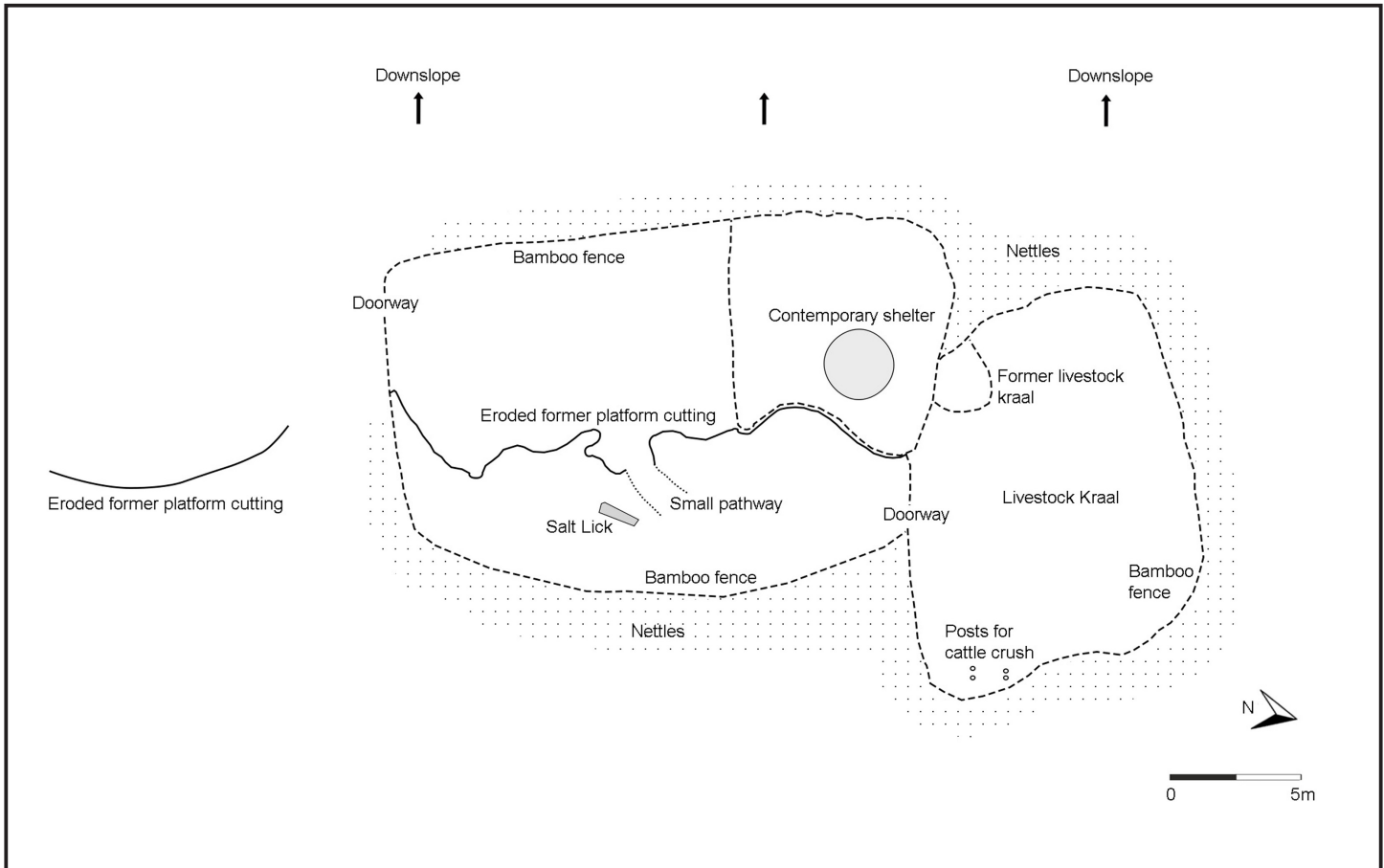


Figure 5: Survey of a housing platform that has been re-appropriated.

near the Embobut River. Each Sengwer clan had their own area in which they could construct their houses, creating a complex mosaic of territories defined by topographical features such as hill ridges and gullies. Figure 4 illustrates an area where a total of 89 abandoned housing platforms belonging to the Sengwer clan of Kapsaniak were surveyed, all of which are confined to a particular hill on the east of the Koropkwen glade.

To complement the rearing of livestock, people also foraged and kept beehives in specific forested areas belonging to each clan. Given the importance of forest resources, strict community rules dictated how these areas were managed in order to stop people from unnecessarily damaging the forest. For example, individuals could only erect beehives and hunt in their own forest area and permission had to be granted from community elders if someone wanted to cut a tree for construction purposes.

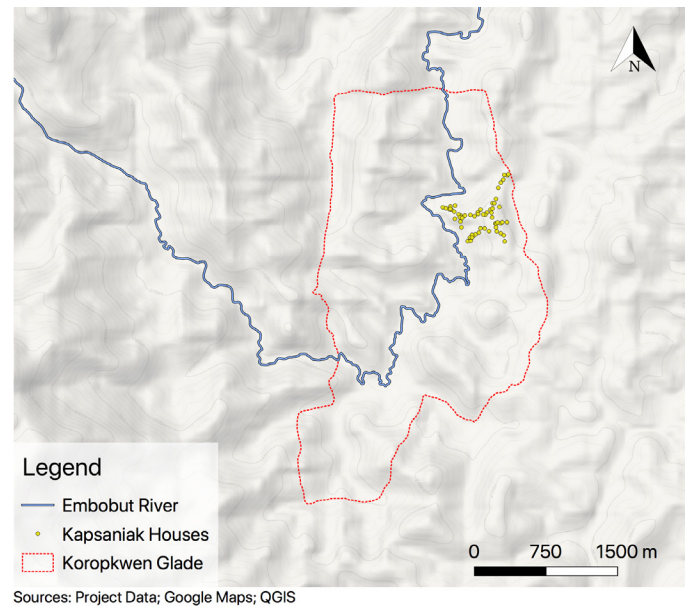


Figure 4: Location of Kapsaniak clan houses in Koropkwen glade.

Importantly, livelihoods were not confined to the highland forests. Every two months, people living in the glades took cattle to the salt licks located in the Kerio Valley as there were none in the highlands. In addition, people travelled to the lower slopes of the Elgeyo Escarpment and Kerio Valley where cultivation was already practised (Davies and Moore 2016) and exchanged meat, milk and honey for cereals such as sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) and finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*). As a result, an intricate network of exchange connected communities from the Kerio Valley, up the Elgeyo Escarpment and into the highland forests (Davies 2015; Pollard *et al.* 2015). However, and according to informants, this exchange network began to dwindle in the early 1960s when people started to experiment with plantation of crop in the glades, and individuals living on the Elgeyo Escarpment started to move up into the forest where there was more space. This resulted in a shift in settlement in the forest area, with populations moving further away from the Embobut River onto higher slopes where there was more room for the construction of field systems. Consequently, towards the end of the twentieth century, the glades began to expand as people cleared forest. This unfolding of new landscapes in the form of more grassland and agricultural activity led to a decrease in forest vegetation that likely prompted the Kenya Forest Service to take more extreme action and led to continued evictions starting in the 1980s.

As a consequence, many people have been forced to move outside of the conservation area, building new households in neighbouring commercial centres and abandoning homesteads in the forest glades that then collapsed into today's ruins. However, the glades remain an important part of many people's lives as they keep their livestock inside. As such, many individuals travel to and from the glades on a daily basis, with some even re-appropriating former housing platforms by constructing kraals and semi-permanent structures in order to shelter from the rain and periodically sleep in (Figure 5). These shelters are often built within the individual's pre-eviction compound in their clan territory, occasionally hidden amongst vegetation in order to stay out of view from the Kenya Forest Service which periodically carries out raids and burns the structures.

From this brief discussion, it is clear that the people residing in Embobut have had an intricate yet changing relationship with the forest environment that has unfolded

in different ways over the past century. The colonial imposition of conservation areas written onto local ways of experiencing Embobut marked the onset of changing livelihoods that culminated in forceful evictions. Although this narrative has continued into the present, the evictions have not left the region void of human habitation. Instead, people continued to live with the glades, adapting by appropriating former living spaces to tend to cattle and ultimately maintain access to their forests.

Concluding Remarks

In this report I have offered a brief summary of the current research project that attempts to contextualise a highly contentious political debate by exploring the archaeology of the contemporary past of populations residing in Embobut. Among the many strands of inquiry emerging from this project, I should like to conclude here by stressing that changing livelihoods and their archaeological correlates within the glades of Embobut should not be viewed as humans simply acting upon a pristine landscape through mere haphazard deforestation. Instead, the material remains signify the 'working out' of particular ways of life of people who are integrally bound to their constructed landscapes. Moreover, archaeological evidence does not mark an end to human activity but rather one phase in an ongoing sequence of engagements with the forest. It is important to emphasise that this is not the only way of understanding landscape change in the region. Indeed, I have discussed how, from a local perspective, the demarcations of forest blocks by the colonial Forest Department in the early twentieth century signified new concepts of conservation and landscape that existed outside of the experiences of local people. In viewing these areas as a pristine forest, the attempts by the Forest Department to safeguard the ecosystem were premised on the notion that the forest needed to be isolated from human activity. From a local perspective, however, it was the very demarcation and creation of forest reserves that signified a radical *onset*, rather than halting, of changing forest landscapes through the introduction of exotic tree plantations and increased infrastructure. For the Sengwer, these strange new landscapes were written on and in spite of collective ways of experiencing and understanding the Embobut landscape.

Having completed my fieldwork, this project continues to focus on the entangled relationship between material histories and notions of indigeneity and identity. My research also aims to continue collaborating with community members in the Embobut Forest, the Kenya Forest Service and human rights groups such as the Forest Peoples Programme and Amnesty International in order to engage more directly with debates surrounding conservation, ‘indigeneity’ and community rights to land.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mr. Joseph Kimatai and Miss Dorcas Jebet for their dedication and hard work in hosting me and as-

sisting with my research. I am also grateful to the numerous community members who took part in the interviews. Thanks is due to Mr. Timothy Kipkeu and the members of the Marakwet research station who continually aided me with my field work. Acknowledgment is also due to the British Institute in Eastern Africa for its funding and overall support throughout my time in Kenya. Likewise, gratitude goes to the Wenner Gren Foundation and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding my fieldwork, without which this project would not have been possible. Finally, I am grateful to the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation in Kenya for granting me permission to conduct my research under the permit number NACOSTI/P/16/42758/9561.

References Cited

African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR)
 2006 *Indigenous Peoples in Africa: The Forgotten Peoples?* Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.

Atalay, S.
 2006 ‘Indigenous Archaeology as Decolonizing Practice’. *American Indian Quarterly* 30(3-4): 280-310.

Balée, W.
 2013 ‘Indigeneity of Past Landscape Transformations of the Tropics’. In: Davies, M.I., M’Mbogori, F. N. (eds). 2013. *Humans and the Environment: New Archaeological Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barnard, A.
 2006 ‘Kalahari revisionism, Vienna and the ‘indigenous peoples’ Debate’. *Social Anthropology* 14, 1–16.

Buchli, V., Lucas, G. (eds.)
 2001 *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*. London: Routledge.

Colwell-Chanthaphonh, C., Ferguson, T., Lippert, D., McGuire, R., Nicholas, G., Watkins, J. and Zimmerman, L.
 2010 ‘The Premise and Promise of Indigenous Archaeology’. *American Antiquity* 75(2): 228-238.

Davies, M.
 2015 ‘Economic Specialisation, Resource Variability, and the Origins of Intensive Agriculture in Eastern Africa’. *Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History* 2(1).

Davies, M.I.J. and Moore, H.L.
 2016 Landscape, Time and Cultural Resilience: A Brief History of Agriculture in Pokot and Marakwet, Kenya. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10(1): 67-87.

Gausset, Q., Kenrick, J. and Gibb, R.,
 2011 ‘Indigeneity and Autochthony: A Couple of False Twins?’ *Social Anthropology* 19(2):135-142.

Harrison, R. and Schofield, J.,
 2010 *After Modernity: Archaeological Approaches to the Contemporary Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ingold, T.
 2000 *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Liveliness, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.

Kenrick, J., Lewis, J.
 2004 ‘Indigenous Peoples’ Rights and the Politics of the Term ‘Indigenous’’. *Anthropology Today* 20(2): 4-9.

- Kenya Forest Service
 2015 Kenya Forest Service 2015. *Cherangani Hills Forest Strategic Ecosystem Management Plan 2015 – 2040*. [Online Document] Available at https://www.kefri.co.ke/PDF/Publications/Cherangani%20Hills%20Strategic%20Ecosystem%20Plan%202015_2040-1.pdf [Accessed 16.07.2019].
- Kiage, L.M. and Liu, K.B.
 2006 'Late Quaternary Paleoenvironmental Changes in East Africa: A Review of Multiproxy Evidence from Palynology, Lake Sediments, and Associated Records'. *Progress in Physical Geography* 30(5): 633-658.
- Kuper, A.
 2003 'The Return of the Native'. *Current Anthropology* 44(3): 389-402.
- Lane, P.
 2011 'Possibilities for a postcolonial Archaeology in Sub-Saharan Africa: Indigenous and Usable Pasts'. *World Archaeology* 43(1): 7-25.
- Lane, P.J.
 2014 'Being "Indigenous" and Being "Colonised" in Africa: Contrasting Experiences and Their Implications for a Post-Colonial Archaeology'. In: Ferris, N., Harrison, R., Wilcox, M.V. (eds.) 2014. *Rethinking Colonial Pasts Through Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp.423-444.
- Lucas, G.
 2004 *The Archaeology of Time*. New York: Routledge.
- Lynch, G.
 2006 'Negotiating Ethnicity: Identity Politics in Contemporary Kenya'. *Review of African Political Economy* 107: 49-65.
 2011 'Kenya's New Indigenes: Negotiating Local Identities in a Global Context'. *Nations and Nationalism* 17(1): 148-167.
- 2016 'What's in a Name? The Politics of Naming Ethnic Groups in Kenya's Cherangany Hills'. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10(1): 208-227.
- McGhee, R.
 2008 'Aboriginalism and the Problems of Indigenous Archaeology'. *American Antiquity* 73(4): 579-597.
- Moore, H.
 1986 *Space, Text and Gender: An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet of Kenya*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Neumann, R.P.
 2002 'The Postwar Conservation Boom in British Colonial Africa'. *Environmental History* 7(1): 22-47.
- Ofcansky, T.P.
 1984 'Kenya Forestry Under British Colonial Administration, 1895-1963'. *Journal of Forest History* 28(3):136-143.
- Pollard, G., Davies, M.I. and Moore, H.L.
 2015 'Women, Marketplaces and Exchange Partners Amongst the Marakwet of Northwest Kenya'. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9(3): 412-439.
- Suzman, J.
 2002 'Kalahari Conundrums: Relocation, Resistance and International Support in the Central Kalahari, Botswana'. *Before Farming* 1: 16-25.
- Tilley, C.
 2006 'Introduction: Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage'. *Journal of Material Culture* 11(1-2): 7-32.
- Wilcox, M.
 2010 'Saving Indigenous Peoples from Ourselves: Separate but Equal Archaeology is not Scientific Archaeology'. *American Antiquity* 75(2): 221-227.