

Religious Activities Carried Out in Mt. Elgon Forest

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Abstract- The ecology of the Mt. Elgon woods is a hotspot for biodiversity and is home to over 100 plant species, including epiphytic orchids, ferns, trailing lianas, mixed bamboo, and a heath zone with dense bushes and a moorland. Despite the substantial benefits, anthropogenic and natural factors have had a variety of negative effects on the forest environment.. This essay looks at the religious practices practiced in the Mt. Elgon Forest. Adult residents of the Mt. Elgon forest and the nearby wards who benefited from its resources and shared certain religious and cultural beliefs that were practiced in the forest made up the study's target demographic. The Catholic Church, New Reformed Pentecostal Church, and Seventh Day Adventist Church were among the local churches. In Mt. Elgon, religious practices included gathering medicinal plants for sacrifice, praying, performing birth and marriage rituals, and performing initiation and funeral rites. Since the majority of the residents of the forest and its surrounding areas relied on herbal medicine for their medical requirements, it was determined that harvesting medicinal plants was the most prevalent religious activity. The results demonstrated that collective religious beliefs and cultural behaviors had been practiced for many generations While Christianity was primarily preserved in Kapsokwony and Cheptais, ATR was primarily upheld in Kaptama and Chepyuk.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ecology of the Mt. Elgon woods is a hotspot for biodiversity and is home to over 100 plant species, including epiphytic orchids, ferns, trailing lianas, mixed bamboo, and a heath zone with dense bushes and a moorland (Ongugo 2008). It serves as a water catchment area for numerous rivers, including the river Nzoia, and is home to a variety of endangered indigenous tree and animal species. The forest serves as a focal point for religious and cultural activity and is crucial for sequestering carbon. For nearby people,

the forest provides food, subsistence hunting, wild fruits, honey, thatching materials, medicine, and opportunities for cultural and religious activities (Russell et al., 2017).

Despite the immense benefits, the forests' ecosystem has been facing diverse influence from natural and anthropogenic activities. The activities include religious and cultural activities, deforestation, mining, agriculture and logging. While much has been documented on the role of agriculture, logging and deforestation on biodiversity degradation, little seems to be known on the effects of religious activities on biodiversity in the region. Across the globe, some religious activities have been used as mechanisms to conserve the forests while others have at some time been associated with biodiversity degradation creating a gap that this study intends to fill. This study intends to examine the religious activities carried out in Mt. Elgon Forest ecosystem, the effects of religious on floral diversity and establish the various religious intervening mechanism that can be adopted to minimize biodiversity degradation in Mt Elgon forest ecosystem. The purpose of this paper is to examine the religious activities carried out in Mt. Elgon Forest.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kenya's Mount Elgon Forest Ecosystem is one of the five major water towers in the country and the second highest mountain in the country. It is an important catchment for River Nzoia which drains into Lake Victoria and River Turkwel which drains into Lake Turkana. It is also the source of River Malakisi, which flows from Kenya into Uganda. The forest ecosystem is a biodiversity hotspot of global significance, supporting several endemic plant and animal species. It was declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 2003 in recognition of its significance as a water tower and biodiversity reservoir. The ecosystem is gazetted as a montane forest reserve (73,705 ha) managed by the Kenya

Forest Service, a national park (16,916 ha) managed by the Kenya Wildlife Service and a nature reserve (17,200 ha) managed by Bungoma County Government. (Ogungo, 2008). Due to its features like deep caves, shrubs, groves and many others, Mt. Elgon Forest has often been used as sites of ancestral burials, initiation sites, circumcision, worship or places where people can communicate with their ancestors. Religious activities carried out in Mt Elgon forests have varied effects and can either help to sustain or destroy biodiversity. Similarly, it is not clear whether the religious activities carried out in Mt Elgon forest ecosystem have the conservation of the forest in mind creating a research gap.

Mt. Elgon forest is essential to the survival of many local people and provide food through wildlife harvesting and grazing for livestock, timber and fuel wood extraction, medicinal plants as well as being important for spiritual and cultural values (Matiku, 2003). These forest is under high levels of pressure, with many threats, including over-exploitation, over-grazing of livestock and unsustainable deforestation (Metcalf *et al.*, 2010). Negi (2005) opines that religious beliefs and rituals are very much inter-linked and intimately related to management of the ecosystems. Religion forwards the conservation of natural biodiversity in several different ways. It provides ethical and social models for living respectfully with nature. For most cultures, religion is a primary means of defining right and wrong. Since nature has spiritual powers, it commands respect and is included in the religious code of morality and etiquette by all religions. These ethical beliefs and religious values influence human behavior towards others, including relationships with all creatures and plant life. In this regard, most religions have taboos and prohibitions from destroying forests. Some totemic animals and plants found in many cultures plus sacred shrines are regarded as holy and protected. It goes without saying therefore that religion plays a big part in the conservation of biodiversity.

Matiku, (2003) opines that the most significant effect of forest degradation due to some religious activities like cutting trees to build shrines and churches for worship or for herbal medicine is loss of habitat leading to species loss and extinction of indigenous

trees. This could also be the case for Mt Elgon where the forest is degraded from acquisition of trees to be used to construct churches and shrines. In the end, this could have an effect on floral diversity in the region. The loss of trees and other vegetation can cause climate change, desertification, soil erosion, agrobiodiversity degradation, flooding, increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and a host of problems for indigenous people. Additionally, destruction of plants could interfere with the habitat of many animal species in the region.

In Kenya herbal medicine has been used for generations by different communities, especially in the rural areas for religious and cultural purposes (Nagata, 2011). In some instances, herbal remedies are combined with conventional medicine especially when the subjects feel that the prescription drugs are not effective (Torres, 2012). The use of Ethno botanical medicines in Kenya and Mt Elgon in particular has been part and parcel of the health system for a long time (Okello, 2007). Unfortunately, over use of this plants for herbal medicine destroys forests leading to extinction of some of the indigenous plants. Forests are among the most biologically diverse ecosystems on the planet and removal of tree barks or roots for medicine leads to their degradation. In Mt Elgon, wild edible vegetables have been seen as a contributor of significance when it comes to socioeconomic well-being of societies (Masayi, 2021). The use of wild edible vegetation for medicinal purposes was also documented in Zimbabwe (Maroyi, 2011). Many studies conducted in the Vhembe region of the Limpopo Province in South Africa concluded that there was a lot of uses of wild plants for medicinal reasons (Nesamvuni *et al.*, 2001, Maanda and Bhat, 2010).

Religious activities in Mt Elgon involve the use of wild fires. Wildfires resulting from religious activities could emit carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that will contribute significantly to global warming. They also inject soot and other aerosols into the atmosphere, with complex effects on warming, cooling and variations in precipitations. Metcalfe (2010) insists that although the exact quantities are difficult to calculate, scientists estimate that wildfires emitted about 8 billion tons of

CO₂ per year for the past 20 years. In 2017, total global CO₂ emissions reached 32.5 billion tons, according to the International Energy Agency.

In Kenya and particularly Mt Elgon, there is the loss of animal and plant species due to their loss of habitat because of cultural activities like over hunting of the animals for food during religious activities in the forests. Githitho, (2003) notes that loss of Habitat is one of the most dangerous and unsettling effects of deforestation. In traditional African society, some wildlife by-products and their parts are considered medicinal and are also used for religious and cultural practices. In the installation of traditional rulers and in performing traditional rites, some specific wild animals and their byproducts must be sacrificed (Agha, 2012). In many parts of western Kenya, such as Mt Elgon, leopard's skin is hunted and used in religious activities like circumcision (Arinze, 2001). Many animals have been hunted to near extinction across the globe for many reasons for example crocodiles have been long hunted for their valuable skins used to make shoes, belts, bags and for medicinal properties of some of their organs (Nzoiwu, 2012). The muskox nearly became extinct because of over-hunting throughout the late 1900s until the 1930s for their hides, food and trophies (Karanth & DeFries, 2010). The flying fox, a bat of the genus *Pteropus* is the largest species of bat in the world, like many species native to the Pacific, it is threatened with extinction because it is over-hunted for its meat's medicinal purposes which is believed to help cure asthma (Agulanna, 2010).

Many people have carried out research in Mt Elgon forest ecosystem in Kenya. Masayi (2021) notes that changes in land use in forest ecosystem including Mt. Elgon forest could lead to a decline in biodiversity and impact negatively on the livelihoods of the forest adjacent communities. The research however failed to establish the effects of religious activities as a sociocultural land use on biodiversity in the region. Additionally, the research established that land uses such as agriculture had led to a decline in medicinal plant species in the region but failed to establish whether extraction of medicinal plant species as a religious activity had any effect on the region's floral diversity. The research therefore failed to account for

the effects of religion and cultural activities carried out on the forest's floral diversity.

Kapukha (2019) sought to investigate the historical development of intra-conflict among the Sabaot of Mt. Elgon Sub- County. The study focused on the animosity and tension among clans of the Sabaot people but fails to determine how this has affected the biodiversity of Mt. Elgon forest hence the knowledge gap. Pertursson (2011) did a study on trans-boundary protected area governance the case study focused on ways of environmental conservation but failed to determine the role of different religions and culture in biodiversity conservation in Mt. Elgon forest hence the reason why the study was necessary. In another study Peterson (2012) focused on how protected areas system by institutions and regimes can be used to avoid deforestation of Mt Elgon forest, the study however does not focus on how religious activities influences deforestation hence the reason for the current study.

III. TARGET POPULATION

Target population is the population that the researcher wants to generalize the results (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The target population of the study included adult members living in Mt. Elgon forest and wards adjacent to the forest who benefited from the forest resources and shared religious and cultural beliefs some of which were practiced in the forest. These were adults from aged eighteen years and above. The study targeted the religious leaders, cultural informants, local leaders and members of the community.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Holding of prayers and sacrifices was reported to be the second most common religious activities practiced in the Mt. Elgon forest by majority 83% (281) of the respondents (figure 4.3).

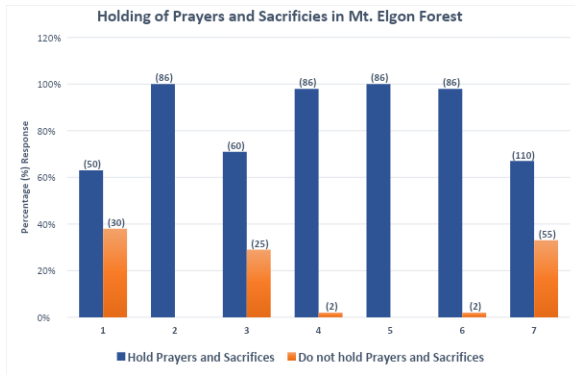


Figure 4.3. Holding of Prayers and Sacrifices in Mt. Elgon Forest (Source: Questionnaire)

The findings established that Chepyuk area had the highest number of respondents who relied on the forest for prayers and sacrifices with 100%(86) followed by Kaptama had 98% (86) while Kapsokwony had 71% (60). Cheptais had the least number of people who depended on the forest for prayers and sacrifices with 63% (50). Kaptama and Chepyuk wards had the highest number of people depending on the forest for prayers because most of them practiced African religion and had most of their cultural practices and activities done in the forest. On the contrary, Cheptais ward and Kapsokwony had least people depending on the forest for prayer and sacrifices because the wards are located adjacent to the forest and the most dominant religion in these areas was established to be Christianity. An interview with a church leader revealed that most of their activities are done in church although a few activities like retreats, baptisms, prayer and fasting is done in the forest especially in the caves and near the rivers. The low number of respondents engaging in prayers and sacrifices in Kapsokwony and Cheptais wards could also be due to different cultural beliefs that have been brought in due to intermarriage that happens due to urbanization and growth of the towns like Cheptais and Kapsokwony.

Majority of respondents living in Chepyuk and moorlands relied on the forest for prayers and sacrifices with 100%(86) and 98%(86) of the respondents respectively. On the contrast, respondents in the Shamba system had the least reliance on the forest for prayers with 67%(110). Majority of the respondents in Chepyuk and the moorlands have lived in the forest and most of their

cultural activities are carried out in the forest, this are mostly strict practitioners of the ATR with many rituals being done in the forest for various reasons for example prayers during draught and sacrifices to appease God. On the contrary, most people found within the Shamba system areas are mostly urban area dwellers who go to modern churches and have put little attention on rituals carried out in the forest. Another reason for the low percentage of the respondents who participate in the prayers in the forest could be because the Shamba system program has resulted in felling of trees and destruction of the forest. Majority of the forested area in Cheptais is planted forest which is termed not conducive for rituals and so there was no forest to carry out this prayer. On the contrast natural forest in larger part of Kaptama and Chepyuk is still intact. The community however agree that intermarriage and modernization has been diluting of culture and with many families in Cheptais and Kapsokwony prefer to just go to church rather that following their cultural practices within the forest.

The study is in line with the findings of (Yablon, 2003) who explains that forests are used for prayers and sacrifices. He further notes that the Celts worshiped their gods in forests and sacred groves. These activities led to the areas where the prayers were held being designated as sacred and protected. The laws concerning the sacred forests of the Celts were similar to those that existed in many other cultures like Mt. Elgon of Kenya. In the forest areas considered sacred it was not allowed to cut down or damage trees, or even to prune the plants. Picking berries, nuts or fruit was also forbidden. One could only use or eat what had fallen to the ground. Plaut, (2009) further notes that in a sacred patch in the forest, fighting or hunting were banned, as was fishing in streams within its bounds, or polluting their waters in any way. It was not allowed to make fires, or even smoke a pipe. A violation of the applicable laws, depending on the motives and the damage caused, was punishable even with death.

Similarly, in line with the study (Ramachandran, 2008) notes that in Asia, many religious activities are carried out in forests like prayers and sacrifices. Forests are looked upon as abode of Hindu gods. He argues that the largest number of sacred groves are

without a doubt located in India, as reflected in numerous publications. Envis, (2008) in agreement with Ramachandran notes that in India, sacred groves are scattered all over the country and do enjoy a lot of protection.

Rist et al (2003) agrees with the findings of the study that in traditional societies, sustainable natural resource management is driven by the beliefs and behaviors of human communities. He notes that the local cultures are strengthened by their intimate connections to the natural environment that sustains them. Most of the people who live in the forest will want to protect it because all their spiritual needs are met by the forest. Negi 2003 similarly notes that Myths, taboos and stories are mostly meant to protect and conserve the forest. a

4.1. Birth Rituals in the Forest

The people living in Mt. Elgon Forest ecosystem practice birth rituals in the forest as indicated by majority of the respondents, 74% (250) of the respondents (figure 2.11). It is the third most common religious activity carried out within the region.

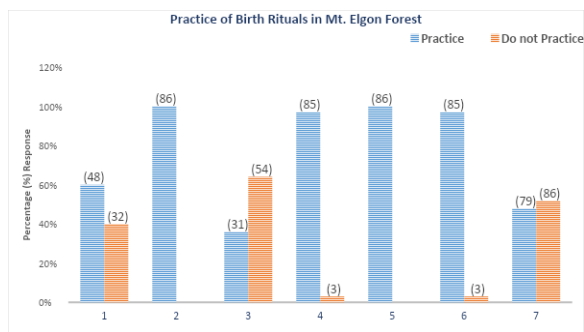


Figure 2.11. Practice of Birth Rituals in Mt. Elgon Forest (Source: Questionnaire)

This study established that Chepyuk wards had highest percentages where birth rituals are performed in the forest with 100% (86) of the respondents. This was followed by Kaptama 97% (85) while the least was Cheptais 60% (48) and Kapsokwany 36% (3). Majority of inhabitants of Chepyuk and Kaptama wards believe in traditional African religion and observed a lot of birth cultural practices. The dominant clan living in these wards are the Ogiek who are strictly observe and follow religious birth

and cultural practices. Focused Group Discussions established that the residents of Cheptais and Kapsokwony prefer to go to the hospital for maternal health care and also prefer modern medicine dominantly. The close proximity of the two wards to modern health care made them reluctant in engaging in other cultural practices regarding birth rituals. This is partly because of Modernization and urbanization and the establishment of health facilities like Kapsokwony general hospital and Cheptais health center.

Interview with the cultural informants revealed that in Mt Elgon forest, pregnancy is the first indication that a new child is on the way. Rituals of birth begins with the pregnancy of the mother. The birth of a child is greeted with joy throughout the community. The desire to have many children especially sons is a sign of pride, wealth and prestige. Necessary precautions are taken to ensure normal gestation and delivery. These precautions include both medical and spiritual attention. Sacrifice and thanks giving is made to the supreme God, or the family gods or ancestors. Prayers are offered for the health of the mother and her baby. In Mt. Elgon, women act as midwives when the time for delivery arrives. Some women are very experienced and may have assisted in the delivery of many children. Customs vary among the clans of people of Mt. Elgon, with some women being required to return home to their parents to give birth. In other areas, special houses are put aside for the occasion. Women are chief witnesses of the arrival of the baby, no men are allowed. An interview with a midwife revealed that the birth of the child among the Ogiek is announced through a shout and screams by the women attending to her. The placenta of the baby is buried deep in the forest as a symbol of the respect the people have for the forest and also for continuity of the clan. The Ogiek people look at the placenta as a link between baby, mother and the community. Its disposal is accompanied by rituals. There are several purification rituals that follow the birth of a child, they are meant for the protection from the evil eyes and thanksgiving. Rituals performed are meant to protect the child against magic, sorcery witchcraft, malicious spirits and the evil eye. This ritual is generally performed by the medicine man who also performs the purification ceremony for the mother to ensure

she is purified and ready for the next child. In many cases a string with some herbal medicine is tied around the Child's wrist or the waist. The Ogiek people also give special attention to twin births because this are unusual births. Special ceremonies are performed to prevent misfortune. An interview with the elders revealed that:

“After the birth of twins, the mother is kept in seclusion for a period of one month. The father of the children is presented with the children in a special ceremony. An animal is slaughtered during this ceremony. The father is covered in the skin or hide of the animal. The couple and their children are then led to a cave which is found in the Cheptiret area deep in the forest. The cave is deep and at the far end has a small stream of water that according to the elders never dry up and is believed to hold healing powers. The couple are washed in this water with their new born twins with herbs prepared by the medicine men as a way of cleansing them and purification.”

Mbiti (1975) agrees with the findings of the study and notes that one of the reasons why twins were disliked in many parts of Africa is that their chances of survival are generally less than those of single births. The twins died more often in infancy and everyone feared that they would die. The frequency of such deaths must have created the belief that it was unfortunate or abnormal to get twins. He adds that people did what they could to cleanse the supposed misfortune from spoiling the life of the community. Among the Ogiek, twin births are followed by series of sacrifices and purification ceremonies.

These research findings are in line with Chukwu (2015) who describes childbirth as an avalanche of blessing from nature to man. Throughout Africa, the news of the birth of a child is received with immense joy (Nwadiokwu *et al.* 2016). At the announcement of the birth of a child, women in the immediate and extended family and kindred gather to welcome the child with ululation, singing traditional songs and dancing. Uzochukwu (2006) further notes that it is an expression of joy that the lineage is expanded. Birth songs are sung in most cases, and the dancing rhythm of the songs makes them more fitting for the

occasion, which enhances active participation of the audience (women) that gathered to celebrate the occasion given that childbirth is a communal event in nature.



Figure 2.12: Picture 2: A local guide showing the team the cave at Cheptiret area where birth rituals are conducted. The water in the cave never runs dry and the walls of the cave are lined with salt licks locally known as “Ng’einta”. The water and salt are believed to have healing qualities. (Source: Field Survey)

Baiyewu (2020) similarly notes that the umbilical cord and placental practices form important aspect of discourse around rite of passage. Human placenta has received traditional handling by various cultures around the world (Nwoye 2014). van Bogaert and Ogubanjo (2008) further note that these practices are often culturally controlled beliefs that function as spiritual means of control over the welfare of the infant, the mother, and the community in general. Similarly, Kanu (2019) describes cutting of the umbilical cord as indicative of incorporating the child into the community. By this act, the child belongs to the entire community. In other words, “it is a rite of separation of the child from the world of the ancestors and incorporation into the world of human beings” (Kanu 2019). In western medicine, the human placenta is typically viewed as just human waste. However, in many African societies, the umbilical cord and placenta are viewed as holders of extraordinary power (Nwoye 2014), and therefore they are handled carefully.

Cooper (2019) in line with the study explains that the placenta is referred to as a “traveling companion” which assists the ushering of the new baby from one world to the next as shown in a historical ethnographic study of the Sahel-Niger community.

On the contrary, (Beinempaka *et al.* 2015) notes that for the Ugandans, the placenta is regarded as another baby and therefore given formal burial comprising of various activities carried out in the forest. In Kenyan Luo cosmology, (Nangendo 2005) explains that the placenta of a female infant is buried on the left-hand side of her mother’s house, while the placenta of a male infant is buried on the right-hand side. Girl children are perceived as temporary or transient members of the community because they move outside the family for the purpose of marriage, but boys will remain in the family to maintain the ancestral lineage and continue as patriarchal authorities. Furthermore, (Mulemi 2001) agrees with Nangendo and notes that the burial of the umbilical cord and placenta is believed to restore a woman’s fertility, bring about healing of the womb, and preserve the future of the newborn.

Siwila (2015) agrees with findings of the study that birth rituals are carried out in the forest. He notes that there are varied burial sites for the placenta among the Tonga people of Zambia. Depending on the clan, it can be buried in the forest under the Mupundu tree, on the veranda of the family hut, or at its center. The Mupundu tree is known as fertility tree, hence its link with women’s fertility. Using the mupundu tree as a placenta burial site illustrates the connection between nature and birthing. Siwila, (2015) further explains that this act is symbolic as it is “a way of evoking the spirit world through nature to continue blessing the womb of the woman so that she can be as fruitful as the mupundu tree”

4.2. Marriage Rituals in the Forest

Marriage rituals are fifth most popular religious activities being practiced in the Mt. Elgon Forest ecosystem as reported by 69% (234) of the respondents (figure 4.11).

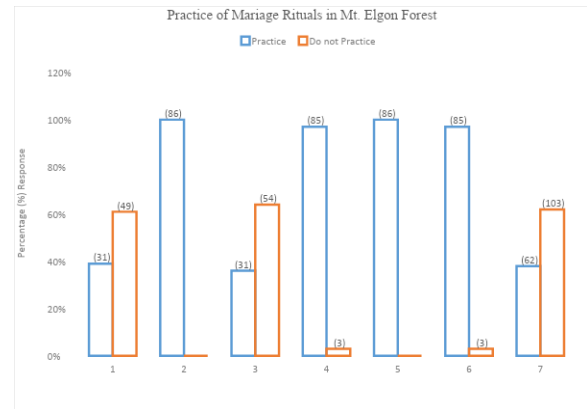


Figure 2.14. Practice of Marriage Rituals in Mt. Elgon Forest (Source: Questionnaire)

Chepyuk ward had the highest 100% (86) number of respondents, engaging in marriage rituals followed by Kaptama 97% (85 respondents). On the contrast Cheptais and Kapsokwony had fewer numbers of respondents of 36% (29) and 28% (24) respectively. Kaptama and Chepyuk are located in places where cultural practices like marriage rights are adhered to. Cheptais and Kapsokwony is mainly dominated by Christianity with church wedding where people exchange vows in the presence of the congregations. Among the Christians, there are a few elements of culture like dowry negotiations but due to intermarriage, many of them are done differently as compared to the ones done by otherwise strict observers of the ATR.

Key Informant Interviews established that among the Sabao of Mt. Elgon, there was both circumcision and clitoridectomy through which the young people are ushered into adult hood. They accept that they have the ability to bear children. It is believed that from the very beginning of human life, God commanded people to get married and bear children. Marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty in the religious cultural setting of the people of Mt. Elgon. Failure to do so means stopping of the flow of life which is regarded as wicked. While agreeing with the study, (Chukwu and Ume, 2020) notes that in most African nations, once married, women are expected to get pregnant and bear children for the expansion and continuation of the family lineage from one generation to another. Megesa (1998) further notes that marriage and childbearing were a requirement for a good burial in Africa. This is in connection to the African belief in

reincarnation. Barrenness is seen as a punishment from the spirit world in Africa Traditional Religion. Similarly, Ezekwugo, (1992), opines that the death of one who has no offspring is seen as the end of the continuity of life, the discontinuance of a family tree and the quenching of the flame of life of the pedigree.

CONCLUSION

The chapter focused on religious activities carried out in the forest, it was established that there were two dominant religions in Mt. Elgon forest and the adjacent communities. This were the Traditional African religion and Christianity. The churches found in the area included the seventh day Adventist, New reformed Pentecostal church and the Catholic Church. Religious activities carried out in Mt. Elgon included harvesting of medicinal plants, Prayers and sacrifices, birth rituals, Marriage rituals, initiation rituals and burial rituals. Harvesting of medicinal plants was found to be the most dominant religious activity because most of the people living in the forest and adjacent to the forest depended on the herbal medicine for their health needs. Findings showed that religious beliefs and cultural practices had been carried out for generations and the beliefs were communal. ATR was mainly upheld in Kaptama and Chepyuk while Christianity was majorly upheld in Kapsokwony and Cheptais.

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