

## MAASAI TOPONYMY IN KENYA

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**Abstract:** The Maasai are the ethnic group that represents the cultural face of Kenya. This paper discusses placenames that are of Maasai origins and the discussion reveals that the Maasai were keen observers of the natural environment and its content. The Maasai named places based on environmental conditions, physical features, fauna and flora, as well as after social functions. Placenames of Maasai origins reflect the historical migration of the Maasai. From the description, it emerges that through contact with other ethnic languages as well as English, Maasai placenames have been linguistically adapted. The paper concludes that Maasai placenames remain resourceful records of ethnic as well a nation’s history, a measure of environmental change or degradation.

**Key words:** Maasai, history, ecolinguistics environment, toponymy, placename

### 1. Introduction

This article describes selected toponyms in Kenya that are of Maasai origin. Maasai placenames reveal the history of the Maasai, their interethnic and language contacts, culture, the topography of their surroundings, the then extant environmental conditions, the fauna and flora, among other aspects of their history and their knowledge of the surroundings. The main aim of this paper is to describe selected placenames in Kenya that are of Maasai origins and how given names reveal the Maasai keen observation of nature. The paper is grounded on subtle assumptions of ecolinguistics. Ecolinguistics is defined by Steffensen & Fill (2014: 21) as “the study of processes and activities through which human beings — at individual group, population, and species levels-exploit their environment in order to create an extended, sense-saturated ecology that supports their existential trajectories...”.

An ecolinguistics perspective of language, allows humans to look at “human activities [as] saturated by language, interactivity and co-existence” (Steffensen & Fill 2014: 7). That way, language and environment are seen to interact since it is the environment that gives speakers an opportunity to name that which is found in the environment as is the case in Maasai toponymy. An ecolinguistic analysis of Maasai placenames helps us take stock of changes in our ecosystem considering that the natural environment has been degraded and this fact is ignored in the “mainstream linguistic research” (Chen 2016: 108).

Maasai placenames show the Maasai’s experiences with their physical environment. A keen observation of Maasai placenames may also reveal the extent of environmental changes and degradation that has occurred over time. For example, places originally named after physical aspects e.g. mist, no longer experience that mist. Noticeable in the description is the fact that original Maasai placenames have undergone some linguistic transformations as a result of contact with other ethnic languages as well as English.

Toponymy research is also important as it reminds us who we are, where we came from, provides information of a region’s history, as and helps reveal the “chronology of exploration and settlement” (Tent & Slatyer 2009: 5), cited in Tent (2015: 72). Such an exercise reveals the migratory as well as settlement patterns of the Maasai in both Kenya and Tanzania.

Research in toponymy can focus on the etymology, origins, meaning of the toponyms or it may also concern itself with patterns of some regional toponyms (Tent 2015). The approach in this paper leans more to the first form. Although the etymology and origins of Maasai placenames are not of main concern *per se*; they are talked about in the analysis.

One study that was concerned with the origins of some Maasai placenames is Kipury (1981). However, her study is not etymological or even linguistic in approach. Kipury classified placenames into seven categories of meaning: colour, vegetation, natural products, topography,

animals, overall character of the area, and legends (Kipury 1981: 44). Of the seven categories, six are directly about the environment, a feature that Kipury attributes to the Maasai's love for and appreciation of the environment.

While Kipury's paper provides a basis for justifying an ecolinguistic description of Maasai placenames, it is this study that actualizes such an approach to Maasai toponymy. An ecolinguistic approach to language involves networks relating to the environment, languages and those who speak such languages (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 2007). An environment may be physical, biological or even social. A study of Maasai placenames applies to a strand of ecolinguistics in which language is thought to exist in a natural ecology (Steffensen & Fill 2014). Such a strand concerns itself with how language relates to or represents the speakers' surroundings.

This article's discussion shows that Maa speakers were conscious of the environment as reflected in how they named places. A description of Maasai toponymy not only provides historical information such as migration, social and linguistic contact, but also provides a basis for comparison of features of past and current status of placenames. With a past background in mind, it becomes easier for one to trace climatic or environmental changes such as global warming and environmental degradation. For instance, it is no longer true that Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, derived from the Maasai phrase *enkare* 'water' *nyirobi* 'cool' *enkare nyirobi* 'place of cool water'.<sup>1</sup> The once cool rivers of Nairobi are now full of garbage and industrial waste effluents. These rivers should be supplying Nairobi city and its environs with clean water. However, the city experiences not only water problems but also drainage problems when heavy rains come.

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<sup>1</sup> There are people in Kikuyuland who still refer to Nairobi as *Nyairobi*, based on the original Maasai word.

## 2. The Maasai

According to ole Sankan (1971), the Maasai speak *Ol Maa*, commonly known as *Maa*.<sup>2</sup> *Maa* is an Eastern Nilotic language with a verb-subject-object (VSO) word order. It is related to Bari and Lotuko in southern Sudan, Karamojong and Teso from eastern Uganda. The relatedness is linguistic evidence that the Maasai migrated through southern Sudan, spreading to the Great Rift Valley and parts of eastern and central Kenya as explained by Sommer & Vossen (1993). Although the Maasai had a lot of contact with other groups in their migrations, they did not lose their language, unlike the Tutsis who were assimilated by the Rundi and Nyarwanda (Mufwene 2001: 167).

The Maasai are found in Kenya and Tanzania. However, we are concerned here only with Maasai placenames in Kenya. Maasai folklore has it that they migrated from the lower Nile Valley, and travelled through the Lake Turkana region. They spread southwards, and on their way to the Kerio Valley escarpment in Kalenjin land, they conquered, displaced and absorbed other ethnic groups in the Great Rift Valley. As a result of this migration, the Maasai settled in Laikipia and Wausin-Gishu (the present Uasin Gishu) in the Kenya highlands. Ole Sankan (1971) attributes the expansion southward to the need for more grazing space, considering that Maasai were originally pastoralists. This southwards expansion saw them reach northern Tanzania, and later southern Tanzania. In Kenya, the Maasai are predominantly found in Kajiado and Narok counties in the former expansive Rift Valley province. The Maasai also have relatives in Baringo (Ichamus and Njemps), and the Samburu in Laikipia, with lesser numbers in Taita Taveta county. In spite of earlier occupation in Uasin Gishu, the Maasai did not settle in this vast district one reason being their pastoral lands were taken over by the British settlers.

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<sup>2</sup> The name *Maa* should not be confused with *Ma'a*, also called *Mbugu*, spoken in Tanzania (see Thomason 1997 for more on *Ma'a*).

The Maasai, in their expansion in central and eastern Kenya, had contact with the Kikuyu, Kamba, Meru, and they would raid cattle from these tribes as well as abduct their women for purposes of marriage. A significant indicator of Maasai expansionism is the names they gave to places they had been in. For example, ole Sankan (1971) notes that *Kaiki Purko* (Illpurko le Kaiki), a Maasai sub-clan, may have descended from the Koigi family in Nyeri and in fact there are people from Nyeri with names such as *Wokabi* ‘of the Maasai’, stemming from *Ukabi*, the Kikuyu name for the Maasai. The Maasai-Kikuyu contact, especially its impact on lexical interborrowing is well expounded by Mutahi (1991).

Other than intra-clan wars and calamities of disease and famine, the advent of colonialism negatively affected the Maasai, most especially because they were moved from their lands (cf. Koissaba 2016 and references therein). The British pushed them out of most of their lands to create space for national parks, game reserves and to provide land for more settlers (Campbell 1993). Their land having been taken, there followed drastic changes in socio-cultural, economic and socio-political systems of the Maasai, some of which continue to haunt them today.

The Maasai and also other pastoralists are “ecosystem people” based on how “they have evolved a way of life integral to the surrounding ecosystem” (Berger 1993: 24). Berger (1993: 24) notes that the Maasai are very knowledgeable about their environment and much of this knowledge follows from their observation of natural process, e.g. seasonal changes, weather and wildlife habits. According to Berger, the Maasai culture forms a web with the environment and as such they are “natural ecologists”. Such an observation is supported by the way they named places based on careful observation of the environment, be it the flora and fauna, the topography or even climatic conditions.

### 3. Ecolinguistics of Maasai toponymy

Tent (2015: 67) asserts that “every placename has a story behind it — the name was bestowed by someone, at a particular time and for

a particular reason...”. This section describes placenames connected to the Maasai, who named these places based on different environmental parameters.

The descriptive approach used is the semasiological approach suggested by Coates (2013). This approach explains why a place has been given name, how it got it, and what it means to be so-named. A related approach is the “intensive toponymy approach” (Tent 2015: 67–68) which gives a “biography” of a placename by answering the following questions: *Who named the place? Why? When? Where? What does it mean?* To successfully carry out an intensive toponymy, one would be required to even do some document analysis (cf. Tent 2015: 68) and of course intensive data collection procedures. Most of the questions related to placenames of Maasai origins are addressed in this paper. However, the *when* question may not be possible to answer in this exploratory and short paper, considering that written accounts on Maasai place-naming practices may not be in existence.

“Being ecosystem people” (to use Berger’s 1993 expression), the Maasai’s ecological knowledge is inscribed in their language as reflected in their placenames. Indeed, indigenous languages are known to help as far as maintaining diversity is concerned (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 2001). Such languages can also confirm and monitor the continuity of environmental diversity in an ecosystem, since they are information reservoirs themselves.

Stibbes (2015) writes that when populations migrate physically, they find themselves in a “new bio-region” that is also linguistically new since their language may not be sufficient to help them adapt to or to co-exist with a new environment. Relating the observation to the Maasai migrations, they seem to have adapted their language effectively for sustainable existence in the new surroundings they found themselves in. One way they did this was to name the environment they found themselves in. It is unlikely that the places they conquered had no names. In addition, the contact Maasai speakers had with speakers of other languages became reflected in their language, especially in things they previously had no names for. For example, Mutahi (1991: 201) shows

that the Maasai borrowed agricultural lexicon from the Gikũyũ / Kikuyu. This is not unusual because to adapt to an alien surrounding, they needed to come up with the necessary lexical, discourse, and narrative linguistic resources to inhabit and interact with the new environment they found themselves in, as it happens for a migratory group (Mühlhäusler 1996).

The Maasai were environmental conservationists. For instance, they forbade hunting of wild animals and wanton destruction of the flora since they got their medicine from plants as well as grazing fields. This is in contrast to the settler colonialists who expropriated land to themselves (cf. Koisabba 2016). Indeed Sindiga (1984) cited in Hughes (2006: 105) described how “colonial intervention in Maasailand led to the breakdown of traditional ecosystems”. The farming communities e.g. Kikuyu, Kisii and even Kalenjins who took the land after the colonialists progressed more environmental degradation. These farming communities’ demand for more agricultural land and other economic activities has led to the destruction of the environment.

A good example is the destruction of the Maasai Mara ecosystem, which is considered a “water tower” not just for Narok and the environs but for the whole country Kenya. In recent times there has been increased opposition to activities such as farming, logging and charcoal burning which may lead to the imminent collapse of this water source. If it is true that exotic discourse or linguistic resources in an area can contribute to environmental degradation as expounded by Mühlhäusler (2003: 46), and considering the fact that Maasai linguistic repertoire has high regard for environmental conservation and for the ecosystem, then it can be concluded that it is indeed the exotic farming communities that have led to the degradation of the environment in land formerly occupied by the Maasai, because these communities’ languages may not have as much reverence for their immediate habitat as the Maasai. It takes about three hundred years for both a people and a language to adapt to a given environment (Mühlhäusler 2003: 37). If it is historically correct that the Maasai settled in the Rift Valley around the 17<sup>th</sup> century after their migration from the north along the river

Nile (Sankan 1971; Mufwene 2001), then they and their language have had time to adapt harmoniously to the environment.

### 3.1. Placenames based on plant names<sup>3</sup>

The Maasai differentiate many plants based on their value for food, medicine and other values, e.g. their usefulness for construction (Humble n.d.). This is equally reflected in the places they named after plants or types of vegetation, as shown in Table 1.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1

**Placenames based on plant names**

Maasai name	Biological name	Present Place name	Locality
<i>ilmorog</i>	<i>Dovyalis abyssinica</i>	Limuru	Central Kenya
<i>entiakuleti</i>	<i>Gomphocarpus physocarpus</i>	Dagoretti	Nairobi
<i>oleleishwa</i>	<i>Helichrysum setosum</i>	Kileleshwa	Nairobi
<i>ilgirgir</i>	<i>Acacia penata</i> / <i>Acacia brevispica</i>	Gilgil / Girigiri	Rift Valley
<i>loltiyani</i>	<i>Bambusoideae</i>	Londiani	Rift Valley

<sup>3</sup> Maa nouns have three genders: feminine, masculine and neuter. Masculine gender: *ol-* (singular) and *il-* (plural); feminine: *en-* (singular) and *in-* (plural); neuter: *e-* (singular) and *i-* (plural) (Mols 2013: 32). The feminine gender prefix *en-* also indicates smallness (Mols 2013: 38) e.g. *ol-doinyo* ‘mountain’ versus *en-doinyo* ‘hill’. The neuter gender “is rare and used in limited contexts” (Shirtz & Payne 2013: 212). In fact, Mols (2013: 43) notes that there is only one neuter noun in Maa, *e-wuenji* ‘place’. The feminine gender remains the default gender and functionally, the unmarked gender” (Shirtz & Payne 2013: 212).

According to Payne (2008), masculine gender is normally used for nouns that are biologically masculine or they are big; the feminine is used for nouns that are biologically feminine and also for small things. On other occasions, it may be used pejoratively.

<sup>4</sup> The data in all the Tables in this paper are adapted from different sources but most of them are from (Kipury 1981; Mols 1996; 2013; Humble n.d.).



The current placenames are a result of contact between *Maa* and other languages e.g. *Ilmorog*, which is a name of a tree, (singular *ol morog*, the masculine prefix *ol-* becomes *il-* in plural), is now *Limuru*. The current inhabitants of this place are Gĩkũyũ speakers, who pronounce it as ‘raymuru’. The official administrative name being *Limuru*. The Gĩkũyũ pronunciation of ‘ray-muru’ conforms to the phonetics of Gĩkũyũ, which does not have lateral /l/ consonant in its inventory. The same can be said of the placename *Dagoretti* from Maasai *Entiakuleti*, another type of plant with a feminine name (feminine prefix *en-*). The administrative government records have it as “Dagoretti”. As it is, one can suspect that the original name was anglicised to its present form. Two reasons disqualify Gĩkũyũ influence; firstly, Gĩkũyũ does not double consonants and secondly, the language has a prenasalisation tendency before initial plosive consonants, which is not the case in “Dagoretti”. The name of the Nairobi suburb, *Kileleshwa*, is from *oleleishwa*, a type of bush in Maa. The masculine prefix *ol-* is replaced by morphological prefix *ki-* is of Bantu origins. This Bantu augmentative prefix *ki-* indicates size i.e. ‘big’; and therefore, Kileleshwa is ‘a big bush’. Similarly, as indicated in footnote 2, *ol-* is both a masculine gender marker and a marker of size in Maa. It might be the case that *Ol-leleishwa* captures both the Maasai masculine gender and size and Bantu speakers may have translated this feature to the augmentative equivalent *ki-*.

*Ilgirgir* is a type of common species of acacia tree around this area. The locality is officially known as Gilgil, and as *Girigiri* to the dominant Gĩkũyũ speakers and that way it conforms to the language’s phonotactics.

*Lolityani* ‘place of bamboo’ is administratively called Londiani. The pronunciation can be traced to influence from speakers of Kipsigis (a Kalenjin dialect), who are together with the Gĩkũyũ are the majority residents in the area. The Kipsigis pronounce /t/ as /d/, although one can also argue for Gĩkũyũ influence based on the prenasalized [nd] in the placename “Londiani” Whatever the case may be, the examples above show the effects of linguistic contact between Maa and other languages as well as the Maasai use of vegetation cues to give names to places.

### 3.2. Placenames based on colour names

Maasai placenames captured the bio-diversity of the places they inhabited. The examples shown in Table 2 are based on the colour of the water and stones/rocks.

Table 2

Placenames based on colour names

Maasai name	Meaning	Present Name	Locality
<i>enkare nanyokie</i>	‘red water’	Nanyuki(e)	Rift Valley
<i>ol choro orok</i>	‘black pool’	Njororoko	Central Kenya
<i>narok-ilmoru</i>	‘place of black stones’	Narumoru	Central Kenya
<i>emaoi narok</i>	‘the black twin’	Mau Narok	Rift Valley
<i>ongata barrikoi</i>	‘light brown-yellow plain’	Ongata Barrikoi	Rift Valley

*Enkare nanyokie* is derived from the nature of the *enkare* ‘water’ found in that place. *Nanyokie* means ‘red water’. *Njororoko* originated from *Ol choro orok* ‘black pool’, conforms to Gĩkũyũ morphophonology, influenced by the residents living there. This region has black soil which gives the water the black colour and it experiences heavy rains and seasonal floods. Note the prenasal /n/ in the Gĩkũyũ version of the placename and the replacement of the Maasai /tʃ/ in /ɔɫʃɔɾɔk/ with /dʒ/ in Gĩkũyũ’s /dʒɔɾɔkɔ/. This is because Gĩkũyũ lacks a voiceless affricate /tʃ/.

*Narok-ilmoru* ‘place of black stones’ is situated at the foot of Mount Kenya. The local speakers truncated the original placename to ‘Narumoru’ to suit the morphophonology of their language. The Maasai word for ‘twins’ is *imau*. Therefore, *emaoi narok* ‘the black twin’ denotes one of two identical escarpments of the Mau, the other one being *emaoi nanyokie* ‘the red twin’. Notable here is the Maasai association of the physical environment with human aspects of twins, which is an indication that they considered the topography to have or to give

life. Lastly, *ongata barrikoi* (also *angata barrikoi*) ‘the light brown-yellow plain’ captures the savannah-type of climate on this region in Narok County.

### 3.3. Placenames based on physical features

The examples above are an indication that the Maasai made use of colour semantics to describe their immediate environment. Indeed, the Maasai are ‘colourful people’ even in the way they dress as well their ornamentation. The Maasai have about thirty colours and five of these colours are stative verbs, the remaining one being adjectives (Payne 2003; 2008).

The placenames in Table 3 are based on physical features of the environment.

Table 3

Placenames based on physical features

Maasai name	Literal meaning	Present Place name	Locality
<i>em' bolbol</i>	‘small pond’	Buruburu / Bulbul	Rift Valley
<i>enchorro emuny</i>	‘the pool of the rhino’	Ngong’	Rift valley
<i>nakurro</i>	‘bare place’	Nakuru	Rift valley
<i>enaiposha</i>	‘lake / ocean’	Naivasha	Rift Valley
<i>nairragie- enkare</i>	‘the place where the water lies / marshy area’	Nairekia Ngare	Rift valley
<i>naiurruur</i>	‘onomatopoeic sound made by the falling water at the Thompsons falls’	Nyahururu falls	Central Kenya

The Maasai word *embolbol* means ‘small pond’. This is an area around Ngong town in the suburbs of Nairobi, now called Bulbul. The prefix *em-* is not pronounced in speech though it is written in the

administrative documents. The younger residents of (Em)bulbul shorten the name to simply ‘Bul’, especially when telling bus and *matatu* conductors where to drop them.

An area related to the term *embolbol* is ‘Buruburu’ an eastern suburban area of Nairobi. This area was a marshy area until it was rehabilitated by the construction of a residential estate. While the name *Embulbul* remains morphologically and phonologically Maasai, especially in the speech of the younger generation, the placename *Buruburu* has not. One may note how the Maasai lateral /l/ is replaced by the Gĩkũyũ tap /ɾ/.

To the Maasai, the word *Nakurro* means a ‘bare place’ (Mols 1996), but the present administrative name is Nakuru, while Gĩkũyũ speakers the place is called *Naikuru*. Some parts of Nakuru are generally dry, receiving only average rainfall. With the population explosion in most towns in Kenya, Nakuru can longer be said to be bare as human settlement has increased over the years, which has seen the decimation of even the natural environment as well as threatening the existence of Lake Nakuru due to human encroachment.

The Maasai name *Enaiposha* ‘lake’ has been referentially broadened to include the geographical area around and beyond Lake Naivasha. The name has also been Gĩkũyũnized to Naivasha although there are some Gĩkũyũ speakers who still call the place ‘Naivosha’.

The present township of Ngong’ got its name from the expression *Enkong’u enkare* ‘the water source’. This area is the source of the Mbagathi river (Embakasi river).

Earlier on Ngong’ went by the name *enchorro emuny* ‘the pool of the rhino’ or ‘rhino spring’, because it was a watering point for rhinos (Kipury 1981).<sup>5</sup> Ironically, Ngong’ is one of those towns that experiences water shortage problems, yet its name derives from the existence of a water source. In addition, there are no rhinos in the area anymore and it is a fact that the rhino has become an endangered animal following

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<sup>5</sup> It may be the case that Gĩkũyũ language borrowed the name *munyi* ‘rhino’ from the Maasai.

increased human encroachment and poaching. The fact that originally rhinos were plenteous enough in the Ngong’ area to warrant naming the place after them points to a changed ecosystem. What remains is a name, a constant reminder of the extent of environmental degradation.

*Nairekia enkare*, pronounced as *Nairegia ngare*, remains agriculturally productive due to its proximity to the Mara water sources and there is plenty of water to grow vegetables on a large scale. However, this is not sustainably guaranteed considering the wanton destruction of the Mara ecosystem that will certainly affect this locality and the farming activities. Beyond visible physical features, the Maasai also turned to other features as bases for naming places. For instance, *naiurruur* is said to be the sound made by the falling water of the Thompson’s Falls named after an early British explorer. From this onomatopoeic phenomenon the present name Nyahuru came into being.

### 3.4. Placenames based on minerals, climate, soil and ambience

Being keen observers of their surroundings, the Maasai also used what they saw around them pertaining to minerals, the general climate, the soil, and even the salient atmosphere or ambience of a locality to give these places names. Table 4 contains such examples.

Table 4

Placenames based on minerals, climate, soil and ambience

Maasai name	Meaning of word	Present Place name	Locality
<i>emakat</i>	‘soda’	Magadi	Rift valley
<i>embusel</i>	‘salty substance for livestock’	Amboseli	Rift valley
<i>erukenya</i>	‘fog’	Lukenya	Eastern Kenya
<i>ole nkijape</i>	‘the place of the cold wind’	Kijabe	Central Kenya
<i>kiserrian</i>	‘a peaceful place	Githiria	Rift Valley
<i>ol polosat</i>	‘place of offering sacrifices’	Lake Ol bolosat	Central Kenya

Magadi is a place where soda ash is mined in Kenya. This place got its name from the mineral called *emakat* in Maa. Similar to the name Magadi is the world famous game park, Amboseli, which got its name from the word *embusel* ‘salt lick’, a favorite place for animals.

Lukenya is derived from *erukenya*, ‘fog or mist’ in Maa. It must have been adapted to Kikamba language since the language lacks an alveolar trill /r/, but it has alveolar lateral /l/ which replaces the Maa trill in ‘Lukenya’. Nowadays Lukenya area has changed; it is very hot; and apparently the fog that used to be there is hardly seen, an indicator of changed climatic conditions.

*Ol nkijape* ‘the place of cold wind’ is another placename that has conformed to Gĩkũyũ morphophonology. The modern placename has deviated from the Maasai pronunciation to that of Gĩkũyũ, becoming [keedʒaβi], although it is administratively written as Kijabe.

The Maasai word and person’s name *naiserian* means ‘the peaceful one’. It has given rise to the place name Kiserian for a place near Ngong’ hills. The name captures the serene and peaceful ambience of the area below the hills. Maa speakers must have noted the uniqueness of this area to have given it the name *naiserian*. However, like many other areas in what was formerly Maasailand, Kiserian has experienced increased settlement, and the serenity and peacefulness will certainly be negatively affected. The name is now changed to *Gĩthĩria* [getheria] to conform to the language of the majority of the Gĩkũyũ who have settled in the area.

Lake Ol Bolossat is only one fresh water lake at the foothills of the Aberdare ranges (Nyandarua ranges) in Central Kenya. The lake derived its name from the Maasai word *ol polosat* ‘place of worship or ‘alter for offering sacrifices’. The Maasai must have found this place peaceful and serene and therefore appropriate for conducting religious activities such as offering sacrifices. Although the name ‘Ol bollosat’ is used administratively, the local Kikuyus simply call it Borosat, fitting the Gĩkũyũ morphonology and phonotactics. After the realization that the 43000 km<sup>2</sup> fresh water lake was seriously threatened by human

activities, the government of Kenya declared Lake *Ol Bolossat* a protected environmental sanctuary in 2018.

The Maasai connection with the Aberdare ranges is captured by the ranges' Gĩkũyũ name 'Nyandarua', created from Gĩkũyũ word *nyanda* 'those that carve out by pressure' and *rũa* 'animal skin', loosely translated as 'the (hills) that carve the skins outwards'. The locals' name represents the formation of the ranges since they look like skins that are pushed from under.

The placenames associated with the Maasai so far presented can be classified into two categories by Tent (2015). These are descriptive (those that capture inherent characteristics of something) and associative (those that indicate something ... "always or often associated with the feature or its physical context", to use descriptors by Tent (2015: 71)). The placenames in Table 1 are more associative and those in Tables 2, 3, and 4 are more descriptive.

From the foregoing discussion, the Maasai emerge as being keen observers of nature and whatever is found in it, recording such knowledge in the names they used for these places. A notable thing about Maasai placenames is the significant linguistic manipulation due to features of the Gĩkũyũ language. The names are made to conform to Gĩkũyũ morphophonology, which is an indication of the Gĩkũyũ and Maasai contact, as well as the fact that they bought land in places where the Maasai formerly owned vast tracts of land. The Gĩkũyũ are the most populous ethnic group in Kenya, and due to the need to expand from their ancestral land, they are now spread all over the Kenya.

#### **4. Conclusion: The significance of Maasai placenames**

One source of African history is the oral tradition. The sample placenames presented show that Maasai placenames serve as reservoirs of both historical and environmental facts. The placenames are indicators of the Maasai's keen observation of nature which is reflected in the language they use to name places. These placenames are records of

the historical migration and settlements of the Maasai in Kenya. The very presence of these placenames indicate the places the Maasai had inhabited which also forms part of their historical and cultural repertoire.

Evidence for such placenames is useful to historians, including historical linguists, in explaining or tracing the spread of an ethnic group as well as the history of the language and its influence, through cultural contact with other languages.

The discussion in this paper has helped to show that the Maasai's practices of naming places are first and foremost ecological records of what the Maasai as a people experienced. The places they named based on physical environmental factors remain a record that may be compared with the existing conditions, if an audit of environmental changes or degradation were to be carried out. Thus, these placenames become important to ecologists, environmentalists, historians, historical linguists and others. In essence, the Maasai naming practices are themselves a record of the ecosystems the Maasai have experienced in the course of their existence or migrations.

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