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# lifestyle

## Kenya's tiniest tribe fights for survival

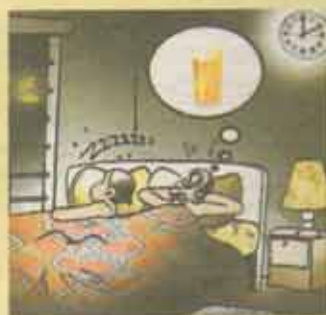
Faced with diseases,  
poor nutrition and  
neglect, how long will  
the little known El Molo,  
who live on the shores  
of L. Turkana, survive?

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# Kenya's smallest tribe now



Left, El Molo elder William Lengotok and above the community's patriarch Captain Luya in the lake with his teenage son Fabian.

PHOTO: HARTMUT FIEBIG

**The El Molo are probably the only Kenyan tribe that exclusively survives on fish. They are expert fishermen**

BY NYAMBEGA GISESA  
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**H**e tugs the boat to the shore of the greenish waters of Lake Turkana, undresses and dives into the waters believed to have the largest population of crocodiles in the world.

"Crocodiles have never eaten our people," says Charles Luya also known as Captain Luya.

At 79, Mr Luya looks frail even to survive a chicken fight but the victorious grin across his wrinkled face shows that he can take on Lake Turkana and its dangers. His earrings and other ornaments made from crocodile teeth show how valiant he is. They are trophies, an honour from his El Molo tribesmen for heroes who successfully hunt down hippos.

In this part of the world, it's practically impossible to find someone as old as Mr Luya, especially in a tribe where the life expectancy is short - 30 to 45 years.

Lack of medical facilities and poor diet are to blame for the low life expectancy among the El Molo, a small

community of about 700 people.

The number of El Molo is largely unknown even by the government. The 2009 census results did not list their numbers as they fell in the negligible category. Village elders estimate their numbers to be 600 to 700, with "pure" El Molo in their dozens.

In 2009, there was an outbreak of cholera in their villages. By the time the Médecins Sans Frontières medical team got there, seven had died from the disease. At that time, the organisation working with the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation told the *Nation* that they had treated 47 people in El Molo and 157 in Lolyangalani.

About 10 years ago, the last person alive to know the native El Molo language died, leaving Mr Luya as the patriarch. He was also left with the difficult task of continuing the traditions, customs and beliefs of this tribe. But with the death of that man, Kaayo Lepolote, the El Molo language began its journey to extinction. Not even the current patriarch is fluent in it.

But, even threatened with extinction, Kenya's little known and smallest tribe living in two villages in the southeastern shore of Lake Turkana is fighting to keep its customs and traditions.

Fish is their staple, something which has been blamed for their poor nutrition and low population growth rate. The El Molo are probably the only Kenyan tribe that exclusively survives on fish. And they are expert fishermen.

"We take two meals a day; fish in the morning and for supper," says Ekai Akinyanya, a fisherman whom *Lifestyle* found by the lakeside

repairing his fishing net.

"A child is regarded as old enough to leave his mother's side when he is able to spear a fish in water," Mr Luya says.

They use spears or harpoons, fishing rods (made from the roots of an acacia with doupalm fibre and a forged iron point or hook), nets made from doupalm fibre, and fishing and traditional rafts made of doupalm logs tied together with rope.

Fish, hippopotamus and crocodiles are important animals to the tribe. In this community, killing a hippo is what killing a lion is to a Maasai moran. Anyone who kills a hippo is decorated with a necklace made from the hippo's teeth and a feast for the whole community is held.

These days, the El Molo receive as many visitors as half their population. But to get there, visitors have to conquer one of Kenya's most difficult terrains and harshest climates.

The El Molo are now finding tourism an excellent source of income.

The story of how the El Molo came into being is borrowed from a popular story of their great heroine, Sepenya.

"A long time ago, Lake Turkana did not exist," narrates Makambo Lotorobo, the curator of the Desert Museum where El Molo's history is being preserved. "A pregnant woman known as Sepenya visited a local spring and forgot to cover it with a lid after fetching water. Water flooded the whole area forming a lake."

Later on, Sepenya gave birth to a son called



# struggles to survive

Melissa. Without any other human being around, mother and son bore the El Molo community which inhabited the southeastern shores of the lake at El Molo Bay.

"If you walk around the bay, you will find members who are disabled," Mr Lotorobo says adding that it's because the people have a close blood relationship. The other reason, he says, is that they drink salty water from the lake.

Count Samuel Telek and Lt L. von Hohnel, the first Europeans who first came across the community in 1888, described them as a group of people "living entirely on fish, crocodiles and hippopotamus meat". Their population was estimated to be 300-300.

In the research paper, *The El Molo* by W. S. Dyson and V. E. Fuchs published in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, it is indicated that in 1934 when the Lake Rudolf Expedition visited them, there were only 84 of them left.

The book says when discovered, the El Molo were the poor of the three surrounding tribes - Rendile, Dasenech and Samburu - and their mode of life was modified by extreme poverty as they depended on whatever they caught from the lake for food.

In 1976, an El Molo chief in Loiyangalani presented 360 as the number of his tribesmen, an increase from 233 in the 1973 census results. The members are spread across seven clans, out of which four have shrines known as *garires*.

The shrines are Marle, where prayers for cursing enemy tribes, rain and protection from snake bites are conducted; Orikala for sacrifices to enhance good luck when hunting the hippopotamus; Origalite for blessing barren women to conceive; and Orisole, which the clan uses to request for protection against calamities such as diseases and curses of troublemakers within the community.

"Different clans have their own powers as illustrated by the various shrines," says an elder, William Lengotok.

The shrines are located on an island called the "Island of Ghosts" or "Island of no Return" which the community considers as sacred places. When attacked by enemies, as legend goes, they used to retreat to this island, catch lots of catfish and spread them across the entrance to the island. As the raiders approached, they would get pricked by the catfish bones and never reach them.

"We stay away from this island because it's a breeding area for fish," Mr Lengotok adds.

For several years the tribe maintained their practice of endogamy but started to intermarry with neighbouring tribes around 1973. They continue changing some of their traditions and customs and adopting ways of life of the Samburu, Turkana and Christians.

Mr Luya has three wives; an El Molo, a Samburu and a Turkana.

The people dress traditionally and in Western clothes. Some wear the traditional *selahs* and beads and goat or fish skins.

One of Mr Luya's children, Fabian Luya, goes to school and has a Christian name.

"A number of my agetates also go to school," says the 13-



The Island of Ghosts.  
PHOTO | HARTMUT FIEBIG



Fish drying on the rooftop of a hut.  
PHOTO | HARTMUT FIEBIG

year-old boy who is a Standard Six pupil in the local school.

"We are intermarrying with other tribes and we hope that this will save us from being termed a dying people," Mr Luya says.

But their interaction with other communities is not without challenges because of their history, economic activities and regard by neighbours as a "lesser people".

El Molo elders say the Pokots do not like them for their fish eating.

"They chase away our women married among them accusing them of being 'worthless fish eaters'," says Mr Luya.

Among the Maasai, El Molo loosely means "those who make a living from other sources other than cattle". The Samburu identify them with fish from the phrase *loo molo orisikirri*, which means "the people who eat fish".

Unlike their neighbours, the El Molo are not pastoralists and rarely eat meat. When they receive cows, goats and donkeys as dowry, they do not keep them for long. But the donkeys are important.

"We use them to carry our fish," says Mzee Edidio Njokulo.

Their small huts on the shores of Lake Turkana are made of doum palm fronds sup-

ported with wood from acacia trees.

Although they live a 30-minute drive from Loiyangalani, an oasis, the water is not directly available to El Molo Bay.

The El Molo seldom show desperation in their faces but they are fighting for survival. The lake, which they depend on, is greatly being polluted, it is evaporating at a steady rate of about 30cm a year. Lack of sanitary facilities and limited access to fresh drinking water is increasing the pressure on them. The conservationist group, Friends of Lake Turkana, says the blockage of the Omo River and Lake Turkana by the Ethiopian Gibe dam is projected to result in a drop of seven to 10 metres in the lake's depth in the first five years.

While over the centuries obscure dialects and isolated communities have come and gone, dispersed by conquest or ecological disaster, Mr Luya wishes continuity of his people. And he does this by telling their story to visitors to the area.

"I just hope that they preserve the memories for our children and future generations," he told journalists, marketers and researchers from the Kenya Tourist Board and National Museums of Kenya who visited the village recently.

## PROFILE

### The language of El Molo

The El Molo people (or Gurapau "people of the lake" according to the auto-ethnonym) live on the east bank of the Lake Turkana Lake. At the present, they are mainly found in two small villages (Layeni and Komote) located in the neighbourhoods of the location site of Loiyangalani.

The original language of the El Molo was an East Cushitic language of the Omo-Tana group, and its closest relatives are the Dhaasanac and the Arbore languages of southwest Ethiopia. The El Molo basically abandoned their language in favour of the Nilotic Samburu language during the second half of the 20th century.

Basic data on the language were collected by the German linguist and Africanist Bernd Heine in the early 1970s, and were published as two short grammatical sketches (1975-76, in German; 1980 in English, with few changes) and a basic dictionary (197-73). In the early '90s another German Africanist, Matthias Brenzinger, published a study of the language shift among the El Molo and added a few linguistic notes.

During the 70s the El Molo were roughly extinguished (almost 100 individuals), but the number of ethnically defined El Molo is nowadays currently increasing. Three years ago the El Molo community, which is represented by the cultural association (Community Based Organisation) "Gurapau", decided to start a revitalisation project intended to recover their ethno-linguistic identity. The project is partially funded by the Christensen Foundation (<http://www.christensenfund.org/page.asp?id=72>), according to which the project is intended "To support partnerships between El Molo fisher people of Lake Turkana in Northern Kenya and local researchers to document and revitalise their language, ethno-ecological knowledge, cultural heritage and sacred sites and restore identity and lost pride as a basis for community development." Therefore, the recovering of the El Molo language goes hand in hand with the rehabilitation of the traditional customs and knowledge.

It is important to stress that many members of the community still have some knowledge of the El Molo language in the form of words, songs and proverbs, and that the whole El Molo community is willing to collaborate to the recovering of their language (a small El Molo vocabulary has already been collected).

From a Kenya National Museum title: The old Cushitic language of the El-Molo (Gurapau) in the Lake Turkana area — prospects for data collection and revitalization



I JUST HOPE THAT THEY PRESERVE THE MEMORIES FOR OUR CHILDREN AND FUTURE GENERATIONS"

— Captain Luya