

Ethnobotany at Oldupai Gorge: ecological analogues and archaeological visibility

Kelvin Stanslaus Fella

MA (Archaeology)

University of Dar es Salaam, College of Humanities, 2020

This study presents the role of the understudied traditional plant use of the Maasai communities living around Oldupai Gorge, as a tool to reconstruct human-plants interaction since the Pleistocene times. The major objective was to highlight the importance of ethnobotany in the reconstruction of Oldupai Gorge's palaeoecology. Interviews and plant collection methods were employed to describe the Maasai ethnobotanical landscape. Also, five ecological analogues were suggested by comparing palaeovegetation records throughout Oldupai stratigraphic sequences with the present-day ecosystems. The aim was to match palaeohabitats which were available to the hominins in the Pleistocene with the modern-day habitats occupied by the Maasai. The proposed local habitats were systematically sampled and analysed with the help of a botanist. The results show that the Oldupai Maasai have great ecological knowledge on their environments and they make use of about 152 species. The plant materials are used for many purposes including food, medicine, construction, firewood, fire sticks, tools, weapons, top/psychoactive, ritual, and personal hygiene and beauty. Based on botanical records, the results show the presence of palaeohabitats at Oldupai Gorge which correspond with modern ecosystems such as Open grassland, saline grassland habitat, wooded grassland, Afromontane and riparian forests, and Acacia woodland. The study suggests that most of the species used by Maasai today at Oldupai Gorge were also available in the Pleistocene, and due to the mosaic nature of the landscape, hominins would have exploited a variety of plant resources from various habitats within short distances. It is likely that the hominins were using some of these plants in the same way like the Maasai are using today. The study recommends more ethnobotanical studies at Oldupai Gorge as tools of archaeological interpretations, and the analogous studies which base on palaeobotanical records rather than relying on palaeogeographical and hydrogeological contexts only.

