



TRADITIONAL BEEKEEPING IN KENYA -  
FROM "TRADITIONAL BEEKEEPING AMONG KENYA TRIBES,  
AND METHODS PROPOSED FOR IMPROVEMENT AND MODERNIZATION"  
EXTRACTS

*by J. M. NIGHTINGALE*  
(pp.15-22 from "Apiculture in Tropical Climates", IBRA,  
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Kenya has many different altitude zones, each of which has a characteristic floral climax. In two zones at different altitudes (1200-1500m and 1500-1800m), where the climax vegetation still consists of indigenous species, traditional beekeeping is carried out. Particularly good honey crops in these zones are obtained from Labiatae and species of Acacia. Beekeeping is still an important traditional craft to some tribes, including the Wakamba, and the Kalenjin and Pokot.

1. The Wakamba The Wakamba, together with their close neighbours, are the most progressive and knowledgeable on all aspects of apiculture, and know such things as the difference between queens, drones, and workers. They live in the large area east of Mount Kenya and Nairobi. The climate varies from pleasantly warm to intensely hot.

For the manufacture of hives they use a great variety of trees, but it seems that the source of supply of suitable timber will soon be exhausted, and that an African beehive uses a vast amount of wood for what it achieves, as there is much waste in hollowing out a log. Most of the hives are made of logs cut to roughly 3-3½ft. long (1m). Before working on the log, the operator buries one end at an approximate 45° angle in the ground to give it good support, while the other end is supported by crossed sticks. The hive maker then proceeds to hollow out one end of the log, using a long handled chisel. This handle is about 5ft (1.5m) long, and it is quite astonishing how skilfully this tool works. They also use a somewhat longer chisel for smoothing off the outside of the log hive. The manufacturer is able to produce an amazingly smooth finish by using a planing action with this long chisel. Having hollowed out one end of the log, it is then reversed, and the other end is worked on. When the hive is near completion the carpenter allows it to season somewhat before completing a good finish. He tries to get the walls of the hive as thin as possible without destroying the strength, as weight is considered to be an important factor. A small adze is used to fashion the split boards enclosing the end of the hive. Most hives have a larger diameter at one end than the other, and the entrance holes are always drilled at the narrow end using a red hot poker-like device. A curved metal bar, thin at the end, is used red hot to put owner markings on hives.

Hives are hung in high trees by means of a hooked pole, which is attached to the hive in such a way that the hive hangs at an angle, with the smaller end pointing downwards. This is the

end with the bee entrances. Wakamba beekeepers hang their hives at this angle in order to prevent any water condensation from lying in the bottom of the hive. They also hang their hives as nearly as possible with the entrance facing away from the strong prevailing wind, as bees become dissatisfied if there is a strong draught blowing in at the entrance and will often abscond for this reason.

The main honey flow in Ukambani (the area where the Wakamba live) occurs in June and July. Then there is another honey flow just before the November rains when a lot of the acacias anticipate the coming of the rain by flowering extensively. The honey is of a good flavour and, if sold in a clean state, should fetch a top price on the market.

The beekeepers work their hives usually in the late evening, as they find the bees are far too fierce during the day. Beekeepers there confirm very strongly that there are colonies of many differing characteristics - some being incredibly fierce and others fairly tractable in comparison. Bees kept around homesteads and near much human and animal activity get used to this situation and are far less likely to become stingers than those in isolated situations. The Wakamba beekeepers work their hives on the ground. One man will shin up the tree and attach a long strap made of cow hide to the fork by which the hive is hung in the tree. The other end is thrown over a higher branch, and the man on the ground then takes the strain while the operator up in the tree will lift the fork off its branch. The hive is then lowered to the ground. One benefit of working the hive on the ground is that the flying bees tend to go up to the high site in the tree. When the honey has been removed, the hive is hauled back up and hung in the old place. Great is the excitement felt by the man up in the tree when he lifts the hive off its branch and discovers that it is extremely heavy, which means a good crop of honey is about to be removed. The bees usually build their brood nest at the bottom end of the hive, near the entrance, and then work gradually up towards the higher, wider end, and finally start storing honey at the top portion, so this is the end that the beekeeper opens to remove the crop. Smoke is used quite extensively.

When a beekeeper finds it necessary to move a hive of bees from its existing site to a new location, he will cover both ends of the hive with thin calico and then carry the hive to the new site, hang it up, and remove the calico from either end. In the meantime he will hang a half gourd at the old site so that any bees returning the next day will use this gourd to settle on. That evening the gourd with bees is taken to the new site and shaken on the ground below the hive. It is usually sufficient to do this just once.

All tribes place their hives as high as possible, as it has been found that bees much prefer this situation. It is likely that the bees' instinct also tells them this is the safest place from attack by safari ants or honey badgers (ratels), and that there is less temperature variation than nearer the ground. Where there are many swarms competing for limited accommodation, they will set up home anywhere available, such as, holes

in the ground, buildings, old tyres or aircraft wings, but where swarms are scarce and accommodation is plentiful they can be most choosy.

2. The  
Kalenjin  
and Pokot

The Kalenjin group of tribes live in the Rift Valley, north of Nakuru. A large part of the area is dry and hot, and the people rely on a goat economy. They are therefore short of ready cash, so beekeeping can make a useful addition to their meagre earnings.

To make a hive, the Tugen beekeeper splits his log lengthwise and then hollows out both sections into troughs, which he varnishes inside with the liquid contents of a goat's stomach. As the varnish dries he runs his fingers through the troughs leaving slight depressions in the varnish to induce the bees to build their combs parallel to the round of the hive. Having fitted the two sections together, the hive is placed level in the top of a thorn tree in such a way that the operator has a convenient perch to stand on. If one is not available, he will make it by tying a cross pole in the tree. The hive is opened by levering it apart along one of the split edges and inserting a suitably sized stone or block of wood to hold it open until the removal of honey has been completed. In this hive all the combs can be easily observed. Up to about 20 miles (30 km) from the sisal plantations the Tugen hives are fully stocked, but further away bees become scarce due to the failure of the seasonal migrations from the hills.

Close cousins of the Tugen are the Elgeyo Marakwet, who live over a range of hills in the Kerio Valley, an extremely hot area where the bees will only forage for two hours before sunrise and for a similar period in the evening, although they will go out during the day to collect water.

Further down the valley are the Pokot, who are not truly Kalenjin people and whose language and customs are quite different. The Pokot are worthy of mention as, although they also work in the tree tops, they do so somewhat differently. Their hives are far neater than others' and are bound with grass or reeds as a protection against both weather and the intense heat. There is a window about 6 x 4 inches (15 x 10 cm) in the centre of the side of the hive, and sometimes below it, which is closed with a cushion of bark fibres. The author himself has been out all day harvesting with these people without getting stung. The bee-man up the tree will spend up to ten minutes waving his smoke torch around the hive. Having removed the cushion, he then blows smoke through the window until the bees are driven out as two clusters at both ends of the hive. He then scoops out the honey by hand into a skin bag hanging at a convenient height from his neck. By custom he will work only one end of the hive from the window, to preserve the brood. If by chance he scoops out any brood he discards it. The Pokot also complain bitterly about the lack of swarms migrating back from the high altitudes, as they once did.