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Pre-Colonial Political Organization of the Kalenjin of Kenya: An Overview

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Abstract:

The most striking features of History of Africa in the 19th century especially East Africa which is believed to be the cradleland of mankind is the phenomenon of state formation. The century was therefore an exciting time, a time when various groups faced challenges of growth and in some few cases decay which was mainly influenced by their political organization. Kalenjin are descendants of migrants from the Nile River area of the Sudan or the western Ethiopian highlands. It is thought the ancestors of these Highland Nilotes were moving from their Nile River areas about 3000 years ago. The ancestors of the Kalenjin were established in approximately their current areas by about A.D. 500. This is a community with well-established decentralized system of government led by council of elders, the political organization of this Nilotic community unique and enriches the History of Kenyan societies in the pre-colonial period.

Keywords: Pre-Colonial, Political Organization, Kalenjin

1. Introduction

The Kalenjin is a Nilotic ethnic community that inhabits the rift valley region of Kenya. As per the 2009 census, they were estimated at 4,967,328 persons and constituted 14 % of Kenya's population. It is the third largest ethnic group after the Kikuyu and Luhya communities (Soft Kenya, 2016). They comprise seven major dialectic groups the Kipsigis, Nandi, Tugen, Marakwet, Pokot (Suk), Sabaot (Sabiny) and Terik (Chesaina, 1991). Many historians have left out smaller dialectic groups such as the Sengwer, Bongomek, Sebei and Ogiek. The Sengwer and normally placed under the Marakwet, Sebei under Sabaot while the Ogiek are at time lumped together with the Kipsigis. There is a group of Ogiek that are linguistically related to the Maasai and are called Ndorobo. During the colonial times, all Kalenjin sub-ethnic groups were lumped together and referred to as the "Nandi Speaking People" or "Southern Nilo-Hamites" (Chang'ach, 2013). The name "Kalenjin", which literally means, "I tell you" is believed to have been coined by pioneer Kalenjin scholars at Alliance High School in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Linguistically, Kalenjins are related to Sabiny of Uganda and Tatonga of Tanzania.

Many theories exist on how this community arrived and settled at their current abode. Some historians believe that they migrated from around south-east of Khartoum in present day Sudan, followed the Nile and initially settled around Mount Elgon area in circa 700B (Kipkorir, 1973). It is believed that along the migration routes, the Kalenjin interacted with the Cushites and they picked up circumcision practices as well as an age-set rotation system. Upto now, the Kalenjins still believe that Mount Elgon, or *Tulwop Kony*, is their original settlement in Kenya. They later spread to their current settlements in various parts of Kenya's Rift valley in around 1600AD. (Tehuti Research Foundation, 2016).

As they spread from their original home at the foot of Mount Elgon towards the north and south, they found much of the fertile and arable land around Uasin-Ngishu, Trans-Nzoia and all the way to the South-Rift being occupied by the Maasai. The Maasai are *Plain Nilotes* and, just like the Kalenjin, were semi-nomadic pastoralists. Both communities were pastoralists and expansionists by nature and their encounter led to years of raids and counter-raids. The Maasai were eventually displaced towards the south but names of places they previously inhabited remain to date. The Sabaot remained around Mount Elgon while the Nandi settled in the present day Uasin-Gishu County, Nandi County and some parts of Trans-Nzoia County. The Kipsigis on the other hand moved southwards and settled in the present day Kericho, Chepalungu and parts of Trans-Mara. The Pokot moved to the Northern side and were bordered by the Marakwet and Keiyo, who occupied much of Kerio valley and its escarpments. The Tugen crossed the valley into present day Baringo and parts of Laikipia. The Ogiek on the other hand, are believed to have settled in their current home way ahead of the others. There is no evidence to show that they migrated to Kenya with the rest of the Kalenjin groups (Tanui, 2015). Once they settled in the rift-valley, the erstwhile semi-nomadic community adopted a sedentary way of life, keeping livestock and farming pearl millet and sorghum. The Ogiek maintained their hunting and gathering lifestyle right into the 20th century (Tanui, 2015).

2. Kalenjin Community before the 19th Century

As they settled down to their sedentary lifestyle in the rift valley, the Kalenjin people developed both social and political organizations to help them live in harmony with each other. There existed very orderly form of government, education, religion and mode of running the semi-subsistence economy. They practiced monotheism and worshipped one God called *Asis*, God of the Sun, who was referred to in many names such as *Tororot*, *Chebo Nomun Ni*, *Chepkoyo*, *Cheptalel*, to name just a few. Besides *Asis*, *Ilat*, lightning, was also recognized a deity associated with rain and punishment. *Ilat* that brought about rain was referred to as *Ilat Ne-mie*, the good lightning, while that associated with punishment was referred to as *Ilat ne-ya*, the bad lightning. Offering and prayers were conducted by *Tisiik* (them that sanctify) at *Kapkoros* (Place of Offering) usually on top of a hill selected by elders whenever the community settles somewhere. Their life was marked with a series of ceremonies and in each, *Asis* and the ancestors were honoured through sacrifices and libations. They offered sacrifices in times of plenty as an expression of gratitude and in times of misfortunes to appease *Asis* and the ancestors (Chesaina, 1991).

2.1. Political Organization

Politics has several definitions but for the purpose of this paper, we will adopt the Lasswellian definition that defines politics as the process of determining who gets what, when and how (Almond, 1987). Political organization can thus refer to the activity through which a people make, preserve and amend the general rules by which they live. In the pre-colonial times, the Kalenjin community is known to have been an egalitarian oracephalous society. There was no semblance to a centralized form of government rather; all the major decisions concerning the welfare of the society were collectively made by senior members of the community. Levels of government started from the family unit and grew into more powerful systems that governed the entire community. To understand how these people ran their affairs, it important that we trace how they established their government.

2.2. The Homestead (*Kaita*, pl. *Koriik*)

The lowest leadership level of the Kalenjin originated from the very basic family unit: man his wives and children. Polygamy was generally accepted and encouraged and the more wives and children one had, the higher was his social status. A wife and her children formed what they called, *Kapich*, which basically referred to a household (Kandagor, 1993). The various wives were expected to construct their houses around their husband's hut, with all their doors facing the main entrance. The collection of these households formed *Kaita*, the homestead. The man was the final decision maker in his homestead but each of his wives had a duty to spell out rules and regulations to be adhered to by her children. A man could resolve disputes arising from his homestead and was also expected to manage and transfer his estate to his sons.

2.3. The Clan (*Oret*; pl. *Ortinwek*)

The community is organized on the basis of patrilineal clans. A clan is composed of families that are closely related by blood. Each clan has a name and an animal totem, *Tiondo*, which they are not supposed to hunt or eat. Individuals were not allowed to marry from within the clan or from the clans of their mother. This, together with other intricate marriage ceremonies was meant to limit chances of in-breeding. Due to dialectic variations, clans across the various Kalenjin communities have slight variations (Chesaina, 1991). In the Nandi sub-tribe, for instance, they have clans such as *Kipoiis*, *Kipamwi* and *Kipkokos* while the Tugen community has clans such as *Kimpr'gotop*, *Kipkoitin* and *Kipkony*. These clans were of average sizes and many clans could inhabit the same locality. Marriages occurred with a small radius, therefore, most residence of a particular area were related in one way or another. The clan represented the simplest formed a political organization under the leadership of a junior elder called *Kirwogindet ab Oret*, the clans chief. *Kirwogindet* had powers to settle disputes between members of the clan and to oversee estate administration in situations where a man died before sharing out inheritance among his sons.

2.4. Neighbourhood (*Kokwet* pl. *Kokwotinwek*)

Kokwet is used to refer to both the neighbourhood and the place where a council of elders meet to administer their services. Elders usually met under the largest tree in the neighbourhood, some distance from the homesteads. *Kokwet* was typically composed of between 15 and 100 families, which did not necessarily belong to the same clan (Chesaina, 1991). A sitting of elders to handle administrative issues was equally called a *Kokwet*. All married men from the community living within the neighbourhood qualified to be members of *Kokwet* council though, in special circumstances, the sitting could be made exclusive to some members. Young men could attend a *Kokwet* but were not allowed to speak unless when their opinion was sought by the elders. Women and children were only invited when their witness of an event was required. When a weight matter, for instance murder, was being discussed, it was always a requirement to have a representative from another *Kokwet* to act as a witness. A sitting of elders in a *Kokwet* was chaired by *Boiyot ab Kok*, village elder, who was installed by elders of his age due to inherent and outstanding leadership qualities (Kipkorir & Welbourne, 1973). This was not a hereditary position but it was bestowed by age-mates to those with wealth, cultural knowledge, humility, wisdom and exceptional oratory skills. *Boiyot ab Kok* acted as a spokes-man of the council and could only relay decisions collectively arrived at by the council.

The council allocated land for cultivation and handled any matter that could not be addressed by the clan. Indiscipline cases by initiated members of the community were also brought to the *Kokwet*. Pronouncing of punishment was made by *Boiyot ab Kok* but actual meting out of the punishment was done the accused age-set. The council of elders could only discipline the initiated. Any uninitiated person, regardless of the age, was considered a child and could only be disciplined at the family level. For serious crimes,

powers of the deity were invoked to ensure justice in rulings. Oath taking would be involved in extreme cases (Chesaina, 1991). Crimes such as witchcraft were punishable by being put to death by members of one's family.

2.5. Region (*Bororiet pl. Bororiosiek*)

Coming above the *Kokwet* is *Bororiet*. This unit brought together several neighbourhoods under *Kirwogindet ab Bororiet*. An individual was allowed to move from one *Bororiet* to another, as long as there was a friend ready to vouch for his integrity. Some people changed their *Bororiet* to be next to their friends while others did so to escape some misfortunes (Kandagor, 1993). Each *Kokwet* was represented by their *Boiyot ab Kok* in a sitting of *Bororiet*. These elders were drawn from the senior grade age-set. Elders at this level sat to deliberate on matters common interest such as war and raids. They also settled disputes between various *Kokwotinwek*.

2.6. Country (*Emet, pl. Emotinwek*)

This was the highest geographic division among the Kalenjin sub-tribes. The Kalenjin didn't have a well-defined perception of geography but largely relied on temporal occupation of an area, as it happened in their semi-nomadic life (Komma, 1992). Any matter that could not be handled by *Bororiet* was referred to *Emet*. The council acted like a supreme court and the highest political office in the land. Its membership was drawn from the senior most elders of *Bororiosiek*. The spokesman of the council was *Kirwogindet neo* (*the great chief*), usually one who was a great warrior in his time. He too, like chairmen of all council, acted as a mouth piece. He merely moderated the meetings and communicated the verdict that was jointly arrived at.

2.7. Diviners (*Orkoiyot pl. Orkoik*)

This is an office that came to the Nandi and Kipsigis from their Maasai neighbours. The Maasai equivalent of *Orkoiyot* is *Laibon*. Kalenjin generally abhorred and respected the *Orkoik* at equal measure. They all came from the *Talai* clan and were believed to possess hereditary powers of divination and witchcraft. It is for this reason that *Orkoik* were isolated from the community and weren't allowed to sit in any council. They came in handy during initiation ceremonies and during planning for war and raids. At the close of the 19th century, the *Orkoiyot* office almost took an executive role when Kimnyolei's sons Kipchomber and Koitalel led the Kipsigis and the Nandi respectively to resist colonial rule (Anderson, 1993). Koitalel Arap Samoei was eventually killed by Richard Meinertzhagen (Ronoh, 2000).

When the British imperialists came into contact with the Kalenjin, they mistakenly took the office of the *Orkoiyot*, to represent supreme authority in the land. In their quest to impose indirect rule, they appointed members of *Orkoik* family to be chiefs of their region. When approached by the British about the new leadership structure, the Kalenjin quickly accepted it since they were not quite sure of what the white man wanted to do with these individuals. They were willing to donate the least useful members of the society and *Orkoik* fitted the bill (Komma, 1992). Conflicts between the *Orkoik* and the community, especially on the Kipsigis side, finally led to collapse of indirect rule. The British had to choose other individuals.

2.8. Ad-hoc offices

Kalenjin community considered all men equal and only appointed individuals to office on ad-hoc basis. These offices included those of ritual leaders, medicine men, elders of war and circumcision leaders (Komma, 1992). Once the activity attached to the office is done, the offices were disbanded and members went back to their trades for the rest of the year.

2.8.1. Military Organization

The responsibility of raiding other communities and protecting the community from external aggressors rested on the shoulders of the men and was centered on an age-set and age-grade system. Initiation into manhood, which was accompanied by circumcision, took place every 7 years. Upon initiation, one joined an age-set called *Ibindo* and automatically got enlisted in the warrior grade. At that very time, fathers of the initiates transitioned to the junior-elder grade. There's always one age-set between the father and the son. There were, and are still, seven rotational age-sets among the Kalenjin, each lasting 15 years and it takes approximately 105 years to complete a whole cycle (Oboler, 2016). The end of initiation of one age-set is marked with a ceremony called *Saket ab Eito*. The age-sets or *Ibinwek* include *Maina* (not in Tugen), *Chumo*, *Sawe*, *Korongoro* (not in Nandi), *Kipkoimet*, *Kaplelach*, *Kipnyigei* and *Nyongi* (*the age-set being initiated currently*). The Marakwet, Tugen, and Sabaot had formalized age sets for women but the other Kalenjin have no recollection of such classification.

Boys that have successfully completed the tedious and punishing initiation process are called *Murenik*, which literally means "Those who lay down their lives for the community". Young men circumcised together established life-long bonds and called each other *Bakule* or *Botum*. Each age-set is expected to appoint a life-long leader as they come out of the initiation. The time at which a particular age set is defending the community is named after them. Going into war takes experience and leadership was left a more experienced age grade. The overall strategy in times of war was drawn up by a team of experienced senior warriors under the leadership of *Kiptaiyat Ab Boriet*. Ascension to military leadership depended on performance in war and knowledge cultural taboos (Komma, 1992). Each age-set under *Kiptaiyat Ab Boriet* would have its own leader called *Kiptaiyat Ab Murenik*. The formation in war would be such that there would be an advance guard called, *Ng'oimetiet*, *Birtich* in the middle and *Oldimdo* at the rear. *Ng'oimetiet* and *Oldimdo* are drawn from two intermediate age-sets who are in their prime. *Birtich* would be composed of those retired from the age-grade warriors, for major wars eldest uncircumcised boys for minor wars

2.8.2. Education System

Education for the Kalenjin happened from cradle to death. The first teacher for both boys and girls was the mother but as they grew up, boys were surrendered to the tutelage of the father. The father teaches the boys manly duties and responsibilities. Much of the learning happens through observation, participation in work, songs, proverbs, legends and riddles (Ronoh, 2000). As the girls learnt home making, boys learnt animal keeping, hunting and fighting tactics. They were expected to know how to count animals, recognize them by features, clan tattoos and ear marks. They also learnt to recognize most plants and animals of the wild. It was at a stage that children learnt proper age-appropriate communication and communal values.

More formal education for both boys and girls happened during initiation into adulthood. They were educated on history, culture and values of the community. Boys, for instance, were taught by men who were one age-set below their fathers. These men were called *Motireniki*, or simply teachers. Inasmuch as training at this level was a collective community responsibility, the key teachers were carefully selected from very knowledgeable men of the community. Under these men, they learnt cattle keeping, crop storage, astronomy and how to conduct important communal ceremonies. It was after initiation that men specialized in trades such as medicine, iron working and bee keeping. Most of these trades were hereditary.

3. Conclusion

This paper has looked at the socio-political organization of the Kalenjin community upto the close of the 19th century. It is clear that despite it being egalitarian, the Kalenjin community had a well-organized form of government. Sectors of education, leadership, economy, medicine and the military were well managed. Each member of the community had a role to play in ensuring that the economy was built, future generation educated, justice served and future generations educated on cultural practices and heritage. Elders in the community symbolized wisdom, moderation and justice. The community had a well-developed jurisprudence. It is in record that elders handling cases were known to follow a very systematic process while handling dispensing justice. The accused persons were given a fair chance to be heard and all witnesses given an uninterrupted opportunity to give their testimony. During public hearing, a *rungu* (club) was passed from one speaker to the next and no one could address the council without the *rungu*. This system ensured that no speaker was interrupted and all witness considered before a verdict was finally arrived at. With the advent of colonialism, most of these systems were overtaken by western forms of governments. To date, it is appreciated that the Kalenjin culture brought up a whole-rounded individual, as opposed to the western system that places emphasis on the ability to acquire and consume resources.

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