

SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES ON LUO MARRIAGE CUSTOMS.

By K. C. SHAW.

I. INTRODUCTORY.

This account of Luo marriage customs was given to me by half a dozen elders of the Luo tribe, living in a location called Nyahera about seven miles from Kisumu. All of them were over fifty, and two at least must have been nearing seventy, if they were not older. The question of the age of my informants may seem irrelevant, but in fact it is not. In the first place their advanced age, as age is counted among primitive people, entailed that they had been brought up, and had passed their early manhood during a period when the customs of the tribe had still not been affected by contact with European civilisation. Their view of life, and of their duties as members of the Luo tribe was the view that had been taken by their fathers and their grandfathers before them. In this they differed from their own sons and grandsons whose attitude towards tribal customs has been and continues to be profoundly modified by white influences. This falling away from the traditional ways on the part of the younger generation is not only a source of grief to the old men : it is also a source of profound annoyance. For it robs them of a large part of the prestige and authority which among the Luo, as among other primitive people, is traditionally the due of those who attain to a ripe age. In the old days this prestige and this authority carried great weight. It was the head and fount of power in the tribe, and the exercise and enjoyment of this power became the chief interest of a man's life as his years increased and his sons grew up and took from his shoulders the family duties and cares of his earlier days. It follows that the decay in the importance of the old men, which is such a marked feature in nearly all the Kenya tribes to-day, makes the elders not only resentful, but also very willing to dwell on the old days, the good days, when their word was law, and the young were still in due subjection to the old and the wise. For these two reasons then, their exact personal knowledge of the traditional mode of life of the tribe, and their interest in the days when this mode of life was still the accepted one, the advanced age of my informants was a valuable factor. Also it pleased and flattered them to be appealed to as authorities, and from the beginning to the end of our intercourse they were only too pleased to tell me all they could of the days when they were young. Apart from a natural inclination to view the past through rosy spectacles they took great pains to give me an accurate account of what the tribal customs used to be before the white man came. Long discussions used to go on over points of detail, and it was only when they were all agreed that I was allowed

to write down the authorised version of whatever occurrence it was that I wished to describe. Moreover they warned me not only that customs differed slightly from clan to clan and location to location in North and Central Kavirondo, but that the Luo who had crossed the Gulf and gone to live in South Kavirondo differed in a good many ways from the Luo who had remained on the north side of the water. It must therefore be understood that the customs which I am about to describe are those of a group of Luo clans living in a small area in Central Kavirondo, and that there may be discrepancies between my account of these customs and those of other observers in other parts of the tribal area.

II. THE MARRIAGE CUSTOMS.

In the old days, before the Europeans took over the government of the Luo country, it seems that a man did not normally marry until he was nearer forty than thirty, and girls did not marry until they were nineteen or twenty. In the case of a man this delay was apparently connected with his duties as a warrior. It was considered that a man fought better if he were free from the ties of married life. Though the Luo were never a fighting tribe in the grand manner like the Masai they had for some hundreds of years been pressing southwards through the surrounding Bantu tribes. Raiding for fresh land or even for cattle alone, and the consequent reprisals on the part of the raided, played an important part in tribal life, and every able-bodied man from the age of seventeen or eighteen up to the time of his marriage had to hold himself in constant readiness for a scrap. The term for a man of fighting age was *wuowe*, that for a married man *jaöt*, while that for a man who delayed to marry until much later than usual was *musomba*. After marriage a man seems to have been exempt from all warlike duties and allowed to settle down and devote himself entirely to his family life.

It is likely that this postponement of marriage to a comparatively late age was, apart from its connection with the defence of the tribe, an instance of the reluctance of the older men to surrender even a part of their wealth and power to their sons. A man could not marry without his father's permission, for it was only from his father (except under special circumstances into which I need not enter here) that he could obtain the cattle with which to acquire a bride, and primitive fathers are often no more anxious than some civilised ones to part with large quantities of their worldly goods for the benefit of their children. There was, however, no hard and fast convention as to the age at which a man might marry. Circumstances altered cases. A mother, for instance, who was without an unmarried daughter, and who wanted another woman to help her in the household work and cultivation, might insist that her son should bring a wife into the family, even if he had not yet reached ordinary marriageable age. Again if there

were other sons by other wives growing up in the *dala* (*dala*=home-stead), a woman would hasten the marriage of her own son lest when it came to paying the bride-price for him cattle might be short on account of the claims of other sons on the family resource.

Between the permission to marry, however, and marriage itself, there intervened a long chain of events, extending over months, and sometimes even over years. The mere choice of a bride was hedged about with complications and difficulties that often delayed a man's marriage considerably. This choice was, in the first place, limited by the rule that he might not marry any woman related to him, however distantly, either on his father's or on his mother's side of the family. To do this would be to commit incest, and would bring terrible consequences upon the clans and families concerned. If it happened, as it sometimes did, that a man fell in love with a girl without knowing whether he was related to her or not, only to find that she belonged to one side or other of his own family, the discovery put an end immediately to all intercourse between them. If, on the other hand, it could be established that the two were not related, the man would get permission from his father to take her as his wife, and the usual negotiations would be put in hand. It was, however, more usual for a man to leave the choice of his wife to his father, who would select a suitable maiden with regard only to the mutual advantage of the two families concerned. In this case neither the young man nor the girl were regarded as at liberty to refuse the marriage. If the son did so, it was at the cost of his father's deep displeasure; and this was a serious matter in the old days when a man was entirely dependent upon his father, not only for the means to acquire a wife, but for his livelihood in general. So to rebel was unusual. The girl was equally at the mercy of her parents. If she disliked the husband selected for her the only way to escape the match was to run off with another man. But if she did this her lover's father would only pay a very small bride price for her, even as little as a single cow, and not only was she considered to have disgraced herself (not unnaturally in view of the severe pecuniary loss suffered by a family losing a daughter for whom the customary cattle had not been received) but her conduct was regarded as a slur on the whole family.

If a young man was specially anxious to marry a girl who was not debarred by any relationship from becoming his wife, and who returned his affection, he could establish a sole claim to her by sucking her breast before witnesses. After this ceremony she could not be given in marriage to any other man. The existence of such a custom is sufficient proof that among the Luo, as among the more civilised, marriage is often the outcome of a strong personal attraction between a man and a woman. And the fact that tribal custom provides for such a contingency within an otherwise largely utilitarian

system should be borne in mind by those who are inclined to argue that because primitive marriage customs are governed chiefly by practical considerations those who submit to them must necessarily be lacking in what are known as "the finer feelings."

After the choice of a wife had been made and approved on both sides the next step, until as late as ten years ago, was the ceremonial capture of the bride. This was known as *mako nyako* (literally "the catching of the maiden"). The man and one or two of his friends armed with clubs and shields would lie in wait for the girl as she went to work in the fields or draw water from the river, and when she came they would take her away with them to his village. She was expected to resist her capture, but not too seriously. As soon as it was known that she had been carried off she was followed by her sisters and as many of her friends as cared to go. On the night of her capture, and in the presence of her friends intercourse would take place between her and her future husband in the *simba* hut (the *simba* hut is the hut inhabited by the unmarried men of the family). The man expected to find her a virgin. If he was disappointed she fell into permanent disgrace. Her parents were furiously angry with her; her husband held her unchastity against her for the rest of her life, and she returned to her village on the following day in silence and shame. But the marriage was not abandoned nor was the bride-price diminished on this account. If she was found to be virtuous she returned to her home surrounded by her sisters and friends singing songs and rejoicing, and the whole party were smeared with sim-sim oil, ghi and ashes on their arrival by the bride's mother. This triumphal return was called *omu wer*. Before it could take place, however, two other ceremonials had first to be carried out at the bridegroom's *dala*. The first, called *diero*, began with the arrival there, on the day following the capture of the girl, of a party of young men belonging to her clan. The party was composed of her brothers and some of their friends, armed with clubs and shields. They were met outside the *dala* by the bridegroom and his brothers and some of his friends and a sham fight usually took place between the two bands of young men, though sometimes they did not trouble to stage the traditional mock battle. After the encounter the visitors chose a bull and a heifer from the family herd. The cattle chosen need not necessarily belong to the bridegroom's father; they might be the property of some other member of the family, and if this was so they were replaced later by beasts belonging to the former and sent to the bride's father. This bull and this heifer were known as the *dho dier* and were not delivered until a much later stage in the proceedings.

After the bull and the heifer had been chosen a ceremony of an obviously sacrificial nature took place. A hen was brought by the bridegroom's grandmother (his father's mother). A string was passed through a hole pierced in the lower part of the hen's beak, and the

grandmother then hung the bird, still alive, round the neck of the girl. Hanging there it was then killed, and immediately afterwards removed by cutting away the lower part of the beak through which the string was passed, leaving this portion still hanging round the girl's neck. The bird was afterwards roasted and eaten by the men in the *dala*.^{*} After the fowl had been removed the girl put on a small apron about six inches square made of strips of leather hanging free from a supporting strip decorated with beads and cowrie shells. Aprons of this kind were manufactured by a man whose special trade it was. The beads on it were made of *mukongo* and the apron itself of cow-hide. The apron given to the bride was not a new one. It was borrowed for her from one of the bridegroom's married sisters, and she took it away with her and wore it until he sent her a new one of her own. At the same time she put on a small "tail" of cactus fibre. This tail, like the larger one worn by married women, was known as *chieno*, and the plant from which it was made was called *tworo*. If there was no fibre ready in the *dala* from which the *chieno* could be made, a fresh supply was gathered after the girl's arrival, and the *chieno* was constructed by a woman married either to one of the bridegroom's full brothers, half brothers, or to one of his first cousins, i.e. to any of the men whom he called "brother." The small *chieno* was presented to the bride by the bridegroom, who first, however, gave her a goat. This goat (*diend chieno*) was in turn presented by the girl to her best friend who had accompanied her from her home and who was expected to remain close to her side until she returned to her mother's care. The bride wore the small tail until certain cattle, known as the *dho golo onyimbo* (the cattle of the casting away of the *onyimbo*) were paid to her father. She then took off both the *chieno* and the *onyimbo*, and they were burnt. I did not, at the time, enquire into the motives and beliefs underlying this ceremony, as enquiries of this kind made through an interpreter seldom have any satisfactory results, but the ceremony is obviously a *rite de passage* marking a stage in the girl's progress from the virgin state to that of a married woman. After the night in the simba hut she was no longer entitled to the name of *nyako*—a maiden—but was referred to as *miaha*—a bride—a designation that was applied to her until she finally left her father's *dala* for that of her husband.

After these ceremonies she was sent back to her home with her companions and to the accompaniment of the songs and rejoicings I have already described (*omu wer*), taking with her a goat given her by her father-in-law. This goat was called the *diend buombwe* because it was decorated for the journey with festoons of the creeper called *buombwe*, which was also used in this way on other occasions of rejoicing. The goat was given by the girl to her father who could

^{*} Women were forbidden to eat fowls (or sheep) for fear that if they did so they would contract chicken-pox (*luro*).

dispose of it as he pleased. On her return a feast was held—the *tero nyako*—for her and her companions. Preparations for this feast were made before her arrival, and the guests invited and the kind of entertainment provided seems to have varied according to the family circumstances. If the parents were poor only the girl's sisters and the friends of her own age who had accompanied her were present; porridge and milk were set before them, and the guests returned on the same day to their own homes. But if the family was rich, older relations and friends of both sexes were invited and were given meat and beer. The quantity of beer required was often more than could be stored in the accustomed place, namely the hut belonging to the girl's mother, and in this case a temporary shelter was built, known as the *siwandha*. It was constructed of reed mats between the mother's hut and the hut next to it, and if the number of reed mats available in the *dala* was insufficient, more were borrowed from the neighbours. After the beer had been drunk the *siwandha* hut was dismantled and its component parts returned to their owners. The guests stayed two or even three days, and it was the convention that before their departure a final meal of meat or of a kind of dried fish called *kabaka* (an expensive dish that cost a goat to buy) should be provided and cooked for them by the mother of the bride.

A sort of parallel to this feast known as *lupo* then took place in the bridegroom's *dala*, a cow or a goat being sent to him by the bride's parents to be killed and eaten by his brothers and sisters.

After the *tero nyako* and the *lupo* had taken place a bull known as the *dho golo onyimbo* was paid by the bridegroom, and with them he sent a new *onyimbo*, specially made for her, to the bride. She then returned the *onyimbo* lent to her by the bridegroom's sister, and also took off the small *chieno* and burnt it, being now entitled to wear the big *chieno* of the married woman. This was a bunch of aloe fibre about ten inches long and thick enough to have a diameter of three or four inches. It was tied tightly at the top like a tassel, and was worn hanging from the small of the back, being attached to a string which passed round the waist. This, and a six inch square apron of fibre string was all that a Luo woman wore, apart from her ornaments until the advent of the Indian trader with his cotton piece goods at the beginning of the century.*

* Even now a woman who puts on a cotton dress when she leaves the *dala* sometimes reverts in the privacy of her home to the traditional nakedness adorned only by the tassel and the fringe, and often the dress is put on over the tassel. This curious ornament has clearly a ritual if not a magical significance, of which I hope to obtain details later. I was informed that if a man touches, accidentally or purposely, the tassel of a married woman, he has to pay a fine of three goats to her husband. Moreover, when a woman loses her husband she discards her tassel of aloe fibre and replaces it by one of banana fibre, and this tassel apparently has maleficent properties. For if any man annoys her, she is likely to take it off and beat one of his cows with it, whereupon the cow is regarded as bewitched, and no one will buy it, or accept it in payment of a debt.

When the *dho golo onyimbo* had been paid the bull and the heifer—the *dho dier*—chosen by the bride's brothers after the mock battle outside the bridegroom's *dala* were sent over by the bridegroom. If, after the *dho dier* had been received, the marriage was broken off by the bridegroom he had to pay compensation to the bride's father for the meat and beer consumed at the feast of the *tero nyako*, and he was also bound to pay one bull for the loss of the girl's virginity. Even if the girl, or her father refused the marriage at this stage, the bridegroom was still bound to pay this bull.

With the payment of the *dho dier* what may be regarded as the ceremonies of the betrothal were completed, and the marriage process entered on a new stage.

The stage was marked by various presents of cattle made by the bridegroom to certain of his future relatives. He gave a number (sometimes as many as fifteen) known as the *dho ikeny*, to the bride's full brothers. If she had no brothers the *dho ikeny* passed into the possession of her mother who might, if she wished, allow them to be used in the payment of bride-price for one of her husband's sons by another wife. (In this case the young wife was expected to treat her step-mother-in-law as she would treat her own husband's mother, and to help her in the fields and the home.)

In addition to the *dho ikeny*, the bridegroom sent a bull and a heifer (the *dher wuon nyako*) to the bride's father, and another bull and heifer (the *dho jochiemo*) to her uncles on the father's side.

Finally a cow and a calf (the *dher min nyako*) were sent to the bride's mother. These, with their offspring, became her absolute property. She could, if she chose, use them to contribute towards the payment of bride price for her sons, or equally could refuse to allow them to be used in this way. After her death they were inherited by her youngest son.

When all these had been handed over, and it should be noted that they were, apparently, conventional payments, made without question or discussion so long as they were within the means of the parties concerned, like our own engagement rings and wedding presents, then the discussions began about the number of cattle to be paid over in return for the transfer of the girl from one family to another—the true bride price itself. I believe that in some parts the number to be paid over was settled by discussion between the heads of the two families before the girl had been ceremonially captured. But the elders at Nyahera told me that there the custom was that the bridegroom conducted the discussion with the bride's father himself at this much later point.

He went over himself to the bride's *dala*, accompanied by his brothers and friends to the number of fifteen or sixteen, and taking

with him three or four cows. The party entered the *dala* very slowly feigning indifference and reluctance. The bridegroom made himself as inconspicuous as possible, and tried to conceal himself in the midst of his companions. No ceremonies took place on the day of arrival, but the guests were given food and spent the night in the *simba* hut. On the following day the bridegroom was taken to the hut of the bride's mother and made formally known to her. Meat was killed and the day was spent feasting and drinking. Finally in the evening the bridegroom and the bride's father sat down together and the bargaining began. The rest of the gathering were entertained by a professional minstrel who sang topical songs, some composed to meet the occasion. His fee, incidentally was a goat, which, for some reason I could not discover, had to be presented to him by the bride. He was also given presents by the girl's father and mother.

During the bargaining the bride's father tried to get as large a payment as possible out of the bridegroom. If he was too greedy the negotiations were broken off, and the bridegroom paid compensation for the expenses incurred in entertaining his party and for the loss of the bride's virginity. But if the two came to an agreement that agreement was final, and no further demands on the father's part or subtractions on the part of the bridegroom were allowed, unless the former demanded to see the cattle before accepting them. This was sometimes done, and if the cattle were unsatisfactory he might refuse to proceed with the marriage. If, on the other hand, he trusted the bridegroom, the negotiations were considered closed, and he might even consent to receive a proportion of the bride-price after instead of before the final marriage feast had taken place, and the girl left her home for good. In this case the bridegroom had to give an extra bull, known as the *ruadh kirisya*, which was sent over for inspection before the feast took place. If it was accepted the final ceremonies were then carried through.

In most cases the bride-price itself was paid by instalments over a period that varied with the ability of the bridegroom's father to meet his liabilities. Usually some months elapsed before the whole number of cattle had been handed over, and it might even be a year or two before the girl's father received all that was due to him. During this period it was customary for the girl to pay her future husband a visit from time to time. She was always accompanied on these visits by one or two girl friends, and was expected to stay for several days. She slept in the *simba* hut with her betrothed, and intercourse took place. It sometimes, though rarely, happened that the girl conceived on one of these occasions. This was bad luck for the girl's parents, but fortunate for the bridegroom, for it was absolutely necessary that the child should be born in his *dala*. He could in consequence hurry on the marriage, which could now take place before the whole of the

dowry had been paid; he was thus enabled to spread his payments of the bride-price over a longer period than would otherwise have been possible. Also the fact that the girl was with child prevented her from being carried off by any other man; apparently a not unheard-of occurrence.

The wedding feast itself—the *kirisya*—took place in the bridegroom's *dala*. The bride arrived accompanied by her sisters, or, if her sisters were too young to go with her, by her brothers' wives. She was also attended by one older woman, perhaps a married sister, who acted as a chaperone. It was the special duty of this older woman to see that the bride was properly treated, and to make herself polite to the father and mother of the bridegroom. But with this exception older men and women were never included in the bride's party. Any man who attached himself to it would have been laughed at for mixing himself up with an affair that concerned women only. On the other hand not only did the bridegroom's sisters attend the feast but, as well, all his brothers, half brothers, and first cousins (in other words all the people he called "brother"), the wives of his brothers, and all his male friends.

As a rule the wedding feast lasted only one day, but if the guests had come long distances, it might last two or even three days. The feast consisted of porridge and meat. The young people were not given beer, but the bridegroom's mother usually brewed a small quantity for her husband and his brothers.

The meat provided consisted of the flesh of a bull which was cut up and apportioned according to certain definite rules. The division was the duty of the bridegroom's father, who first of all cut a small piece from the neck and sent it into the bridegroom's mother, who waited in her hut to receive it. He then cut more small pieces from the neck and scattered them outside and inside her hut. This was an offering to the ancestral spirits, and was accompanied by the following prayer:—

Dho waniego dhiang mar dhakonye juogi duto ubi ucham bad jachien aketo nū tieloka kwara gi woura gidega umi ringere nyani okwe natu kiringia marach obed man gima maber dalo duto.

Prayer and offering were together intended to placate the ancestral spirits and to persuade them to bless the marriage. After this the right fore leg was cut off and placed in the centre of the mother's hut. This fore-leg had a special name, *badjachien* and was a gift to all the ancestral spirits. It was afterwards eaten by the bridegroom's father and mother, and part of it was dried and sent to the bride's mother.

The whole of the breast, with the exception of a small piece reserved for the bridegroom's brothers, is sent to the brothers of the

bride. It is a curious fact that only young men (*yanyuoye*=bachelors) may eat this part of the animal. The elders told me that in Gem, Alego, Seme, Ugoma, Asembo, Kadimu and Ugenya the breast is set aside to be eaten in the early morning by the friends of the bridegroom. But in Kano, Kisumu, Nyakach, and Kabondo it is used as I have described.

One fore-leg and one hind-leg were sent to the parents of the bride, and two small pieces of the liver were also allotted to them. The rest of the liver was eaten by the older men living in the *dala*, and the lungs, heart, and stomach were divided and disposed of in the same way as the liver. The thick part of the stomach was also the perquisite of the older men, who also ate the contents of the small intestine mixed with blood and used as a relish. This concoction was called *kichuri* and was highly esteemed. Half of it was sent to the bride's father. Here again there was a difference between the customs of Alego, Gem, Seme, Ugoma, Sakwa, Kadimu, and Ugenya on the one hand, and those of Kisumu, Kano, Nyakach, and Kabondo on the other. For in the former districts *kichuri* was eaten by men and women, whereas in the latter districts only the men were allowed to eat it. This difference may well provide an interesting clue to the past history of these two divisions.

The hump was divided into two parts, one being sent to the bride's parents, and the other half being eaten by the parents of the bridegroom. The ribs and loins were the portion of the women guests, who were also allotted the kidney and the pancreas which men are forbidden to eat, for fear of contracting the disease known as *hydrocele*. Women with child may not eat these portions in case the child is a boy.

After the *kirisya* was over the girl was regarded as having finally passed into the fully married state. But even so there were still certain ceremonies which had to be observed before she could take up her residence in her own hut, specially built for her by her husband and there assume the normal duties of a married woman.

The building of this hut was never begun until the wedding feast was over. While it was being constructed the girl slept first in the *simba* hut, and later in her mother-in-law's hut; and before it was finished the girl returned to her own home for a short visit, taking with her that part of the dried fore-leg of the bull (*bad jachien*) which had been set aside for her mother at the wedding feast, as well as other presents of food. It was explained to me that these gifts were in the nature of a compensation to the mother for her absence from her daughter's wedding feast, and they may indicate that in earlier times it was the custom for the mother to accompany her daughter on that occasion. While the girl was at home the mother prepared a

large quantity of beer, even as much as nine or ten pots full, and when the girl returned to her husband's *dala*, not only this beer, but also a goat or a sheep, or perhaps a large quantity of fish was sent with her as a present for her husband's parents.

On her return a ceremony known as the *rayue dipo* took place. It was also known as the *wen dipo*. *Rayue* is the name of a plant, and it is also the name for a broom or brush. *Dipo* is the open space in the middle of the *dala*. *Wen* means the stomach contents of an animal. All these elements enter into the ceremony, which consisted of the following events. The father-in-law killed a bull and one of the front legs provided a feast for the family; the hindquarters and the other front leg were set aside to dry, but the stomach contents were strewn over the *dipo* and left there until the evening. Meanwhile the father-in-law made a brush of *rayue* which he gave to the girl, and with this broom at dusk, she swept the *wen* into a heap, afterwards laying hot ashes over it to burn it up. In the morning the ash heap was scattered to the wind. When the dried meat was ready the girl was sent with it to her old home where she presented it to her parents. She then went back to her husband and was allowed to carry out two duties hitherto forbidden her. These were the tending of the fire in her mother-in-law's hut, and the preparation of food for her father-in-law. This indicated that she was at last a full member of her husband's family and so might render services that only a member of the family was allowed to perform.

After the *rayue dipo* she lived in her mother-in-law's hut until her own hut was ready. The framework was built by her husband, and he was expected to thatch the roof himself, but his brothers helped him to prepare the mud for the walls and in building them up. When the hut was finished the girl again visited her parents and brought back with her a ram or a billy goat which was killed to provide a feast to reward the labours of her husband's brothers. Even then, however, the bride might not live independently in her own hut. She was expected to spend the day with her mother-in-law, doing all the laborious parts of the house work and generally holding herself at the beck and call of the older woman. This arrangement normally continued only until the birth of a child, but if the two women got on well together it might endure until a second child was born, when it invariably came to an end. On the other hand if one of the husband's full brothers married the younger woman was immediately relieved of her duties to her mother-in-law by the new bride. Failing both this avenue of escape and the birth of a second child she continued in her mother-in-law's service until her husband could afford to take a second wife, when her duties again would devolve upon the new-comer. It is often a cause for wonder to those who are unacquainted with the details of native life and custom, that in poly-

gamous tribes the women should be contented with a system that deprives them and their children of the exclusive care and attention of the husband and father. But it is easy to see that a young Luo wife might well be glad to share her claims with another in return for a lightening of her domestic burdens. A description of the full nature of these burdens does not lie within the scope of this paper. But I might say here that they are in all cases extremely heavy. There is little doubt that the premature ageing that is such a marked characteristic of the women in all primitive agricultural tribes such as the Luo, is due to the almost unremitting toil incidental to the early years of marriage and child-bearing even where the family circumstances are comparatively prosperous.

(To be continued.)