
NOTES ON SOME NEWLY-FOUND BAU PETROGLYPHS
AND THE MASAI GAME "NGESHUI"

By

CLAUD HAMILTON

There is an incomplete Bau petroglyph on some rocks beside the Nzoia River. It is situated on the righthand bank a few yards downstream from the road bridge near Mumias Trading Centre, North Nyanza.

The board consists of seven holes in single line, of which numbers one and seven are shallow depressions, the remaining five being perfectly cylindrical and some two inches in depth.

The rock which bears the petroglyph is more or less horizontal and, from its smoothness and proximity to the river, has obviously been subject to frequent flooding. This may well be the reason for the board never having been completed.

An interesting point about this board is that it is in a district which has long been inhabited by Bantu tribes, whereas the Bau game is usually thought to have been restricted to the pastoralists. However, Mr. A.T. Matson points out that many of the Uasin Gishu Masai after being defeated by the Laikipiak and Nandi went to the Mumias District, so this board may well have been their handiwork.

There is a cluster of Bau petroglyphs on Nderit Estate, approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ mile S.W. of Lanet Railway Station. They are on an outcrop of rock facing N. by E. on an exposed hillside where, as my Masai informant pointed out, the players could not be taken by surprise by their enemies. Local tradition has it that the K.A.R. camp at Lanet was once the site of a big manyatta of Laikipiak moran (it seems predestined for military occupation) and that these boards were used by the warriors. There are eleven boards or traces of boards cut into the rock, of which one is still in use. This board is particularly interesting as one can see that whereas the upper part of each hole was originally ground out with a spear butt, the depth has been appreciably increased by the continual friction of the playing stones. These, too, have been worn almost as smooth as river pebbles by use through the years.

All the boards consist of two rows of holes in the following combinations:-

- (I) The board still in use has 12 plus 12 holes. It is 37 inches long by $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches in breadth, each hole being approximately 2 inches in diameter by $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches deep;
- (II) This has 15 plus 15 holes. I was told that this was used for another game played only by the Masai - the Samburu also play "ngeshui". No one now knows how this game was played and my informant said that even the grandfathers of the present adult generation would

probably not have known the rules..

(III) and (IV) each have 7 plus 7 holes and were obviously never completed.

(V) Has 16 plus 16, having apparently been extended when the holes at one end became too shallow through erosion. The serviceable end of this board seemed to have been in fairly recent use, I was told probably by children.

The remaining boards are all incomplete and vary from 8 plus 8 holes to a mere trace of 1 plus 1.

There is another site on Nderit Estate comprising three boards. These are in a saddle between two hillocks approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ mile S.W. of the Lion Hill Rifle Range butts. The best preserved of these three boards has 19 plus 19 holes in very straight lines. It is 59 inches long by 6 inches across. An interesting feature of this board is that a trough about 6 inches broad has been carved in the rock along one side of it. This apparently was where the players put the "men" taken in the game. One may perhaps contrast it with the depressions to hold the chips on 18th Century gambling tables.

The other two boards on this site each have 15 plus 15 holes and are much worn. They measure respectively 43 inches by 5 inches and 54 inches by 6 inches.

The middle-aged Samburu who showed me the above board said that, as a young man, he used to play on the end twelve holes of the 19 plus 19 board, but it obviously has not been used for some time as the whole site is much overgrown.

I am told that the Luo play a somewhat similar game called "Ajua" on boards with two rows of 8 holes each, each hole holding three stones.

The Masai say that Nqeshui was invented by the widow of the first man - the Masai Adam. His name was Ole Dogoya ("The one ahead") and he lived at En Diggirr - high ground far from the present Masai country and probably to the North. Ole Dogoya's widow made the first Nqeshui board in the earth outside her hut hoping that men would come and play and that from among them she would be able to acquire a second husband.

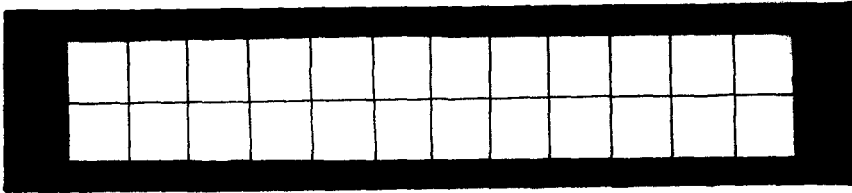
In the old days it was the custom to use stones from the crop of an ostrich as playing-stones, but nowadays any round pebbles are used. To a certain extent these stones (ndoto) represent cattle to the Masai mind. For instance, when we would say: "Your move" to an opponent at draughts, the Nqeshui player says: "Drive away the stones" (terewa ndoto), and when he takes his opponent's men, he says: "I've got your cattle" (a-ata nqishu inono). When one player is well ahead of the other, the winning one will boast: "I have killed a young lioness"! (a-ata ol owuaru oibor, lit. - "I have a white wild beast"); to which the rejoinder is: "I have a brindled ox" (a-ata ol kiteng sambu). The winner of a game boastfully and inaccurately is apt to exclaim: "I've got 100 cattle"! (a-ata nqishu iip nabo), although in fact only 48 stones are used. The winner then says: "Move into a new house"!

Newly-found Bau Petroglyphs

(tamana!) meaning: "I'll give you your revenge".

On the other hand, when there are two stones together in a hole, these are called a sheep and when a player moves them he says: "Break the sheep" (tigil enkerr). When putting the foremost of several stones into a hole a player says: "I rest here" (ka-irrag enne).

Before starting to play, the stones are arranged in the holes (ndotoi) in the following diagrammatic pattern:-



Taking the left-hand hole as No. 1, each player puts three stones into holes No. 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11 and 12. The stones are always moved in an anti-clockwise direction. The following are some of the rules:

Player X starts the game by taking the three stones out of any hole on his side of the board, except holes No. 11 and 12, and placing them singly in any other three consecutive and occupied holes on his side, except No. 12, into which a stone can only be put when it is empty. Player Y then does the same on his side of the board.

The object of the game is to move one of your own stones into an empty hole on your side of the board opposite to a hole containing stones on the far side. You then take those stones, and they go out of circulation for good; but when several stones are moved only the foremost are "taken". The winner is he who takes all his opponent's stones. Fairly soon the stones on X's side move round to Y's side and they then become his to move. After a time when a number of stones have been taken and those on the board are more spread out, each player probably only moves single stones; these are only moved one hole at a time. When one of these is moved into a hole already occupied by one other stone a "sheep" is made and the player gets another turn immediately and has to "break the sheep" by moving one into the next hole and the other into the hole beyond that.

If the latter hole is already occupied by no matter how many stones, these are moved into say the first, second, third, and perhaps fourth holes; and if this fourth hole is also occupied, the process is repeated, one player having a number of consecutive moves until his foremost moving stone finds an empty hole or passes round to his opponent's side of the board.

As I have already said, the winner is the player who, by so moving the stones on his side of the board clears his opponent's side. Alternatively, if X is left with only one man in his hole

No. 12, and he has to move it into Y's No. 1, then Y is the winner. When each player is left with only one stone before the final result, this is known as "One-one" (obo-obo).

(Received 8th. September 1961)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir,

Dragonfly Migrations

It might possibly interest your members to learn, that there was a migration of dragonflies about Christmas time which lasted the best part of a week. There were countless numbers moving about North-North West and we encountered them between here and Mombasa whilst motoring on the Malindi Road. They were orange in colour. Many settled around us and they were flying about 15 feet high.

I have seen migrations of white butterflies many times but never dragonflies.

Could you give me any information about this migration, which may have been caused by the recent floods.

Yours, etc.,
D.E.BLUNT, Cdr. R.N.(Retd.)
Mtwapa Creek,
Mombasa.

EDITOR'S NOTE.

The dragonflies referred to in Cdr. Blunt's letter probably belong to the common species Pantala flavescens which has strong migratory instincts.

This species was seen migrating in vast numbers in many parts of the country towards the end of last year.

This may have been due to the exceptionally heavy rains and to the numerous temporary rain-pools which must have provided the dragonflies with very favourable breeding conditions.