



A Cultural Guide to the Luo People

Introduction

Around the sixteenth century, the ancestors of the Luo began migrating from the Bahr al-Ghazal region, south of the Nile, finally settling on the eastern side of the Lake Victoria basin. They continued arriving in a steady stream until the nineteenth century. Practitioners of pastoralism, they spoke a western Nilotic language known as DhoLuo, which is distinct from the language spoken by their neighbors.

Currently, the Luo are the third most populous tribe in Kenya, comprising over 13% (2.8 million) of the country's population and many of its most influential intellectual and political minds. Due to the supra-national states created during the scramble for Africa by European colonists in 1884-85, there is also a significant number of Luo people living in neighboring Uganda and Tanzania.

Culture

Culture permeates the daily life of the Luo. From the name one receives at birth, to the placement of one's grave at death, culture and tradition dictate movements of the society. Because of countless deaths due to the AIDS virus, there are fewer and fewer elders to pass down customs, and the cultural fabric of the Luo society is unraveling.

An example of Luo culture, representative of life in Luoland, is the naming process of the Luo people. Luo names refer to forces or spirits that exist beyond the immediate presence of life on earth. When individuals are deceased, they are referred to as the spirits of the ancestors. The means by which children receive spirit names is tied directly to the position of the sun in relation to the earth when they are born. Different names carry different personality characteristics. So, when meeting a stranger on a dusty crossroad, one gains insight into the character of that person simply by learning the individual's name.

Luos name their children at the time of day that they are born, for example: Atieno is a girl born at night, Akinyi is morning, Achien'g when the sun is high.

Akeyo is the name given during harvesting, and Apiyo and Adongo are twins, with Apiyo as the name of the first to be born. The first letter of a name also indicates gender: "A" signifies a woman, and "O" for a boy. For example, **O**tieno would be the name of a boy and **A**tieno for a girl, both of the same name.

One traditional practice of the Luo is fading, but has been the subject of controversial debates in recent years. Wife inheritance, a practice wherein a man's wife is inherited by one of his brothers after he dies, was a traditional way to insure that the family of the deceased would be cared for. This essentially means, however, that the children legally belong to the homestead.

HIV/AIDS has had a significant impact on the Luo culture, particularly the sense of community responsibility for raising orphan children. In Luoland, the concept of adoption is unknown. Orphan children are simply and informally absorbed by extended family or neighbors. They are immediately considered part of their new family, giving reality to the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child." The traditional familial structure of the Luo quite easily accommodated this practice, until the enormity of the AIDS crisis left villages with hundreds, even thousands, of orphans.

Food

The staple food is *kwon*, commonly known in Swahili as *ugali*, a type of bread made with maize flour. *Ugali* is usually served with vegetables, meat, fish, or stew. Maize is the main source of carbohydrates for the Luo, but rice is also common. It is inexpensive and grown in the Ahero, in the Nyando division area, which is close to Lake Victoria in the Western region of Kenya.

Another popular dish is *nyoyo*, which is a mixture of boiled maize and beans. Typically consumed after a hard day of work in the fields, *nyoyo* is often eaten with stir fried vegetables, tea, or porridge.

In Kenya, the Luo are known as the lovers of fish. Fish is plentiful in the region located around the second largest fresh water lake in the world, Lake Victoria, and can be purchased inexpensively from the right fishmonger.

Meat can also be purchased from a butcher at any local town market. Traditionally, the Luo were fishermen, but they have had to rear animals and work the land in order to produce an adequate food supply. There are two main planting seasons in a year, where everything from millet to maize and beans are grown.

Basic Etiquette in Kenya

The Kenyan culture as a whole is a blend of many different tribal cultures, and therefore can present quite a challenge in the area of social niceties. Cultural common courtesies vary depending on the place, but following some general Kenyan etiquette will prove to be beneficial while visiting.

When greeting a Kenyan, it is expected to say "hello" and shake hands. This formality is extended to close family members as well as strangers. It is also typical for telephone conversations to start with a polite greeting and an inquiry into one's health. By supporting your right forearm with the left hand while shaking hands with an elder, one shows respect. To casually touch an elder, however, is considered improper.

Also considered improper is to point at someone with an index finger. When pointing to someone or something, it is polite to use all fingers of the hand. Using the left hand to pass something is rude in the Kenyan culture; one must use the right hand, or both hands. When seeing a guest out, it is considered polite to walk with him or her to the car or bus stop. To say goodbye at the door is thought of as a sign of inhospitality, unless one is clearly busy or cannot leave the house for one reason or another.

Public displays of affection between the opposite sexes are frowned upon. This includes holding hands. Pants are only worn by women in more urban areas, and conservative hemlines in skirts are appreciated.

Kenyans have a different concept of personal space than Americans do. Kenyans will stand much closer together while in conversation and you may find someone almost leaning right against you while waiting in a line. They are also uncomfortable with eye contact. Another major difference between the Kenyan and American cultures is the concept of time. Expect delays of up to one hour for social invitations, and at least half an hour for official meetings.

Respect is a very important aspect of Luo culture. The idea of respect for one's elders is limitless. Not only must a child respect those that are older than him or her, but also the elders respect those who existed before them and are now in the afterlife. There are many small customs that represent ways in which one can honor those older than him or herself. One is that a young person may not sit in a chair while another senior person is present. Also, a child is not permitted to call his parents, grandparents, or those holding any of those positions, by their names. When children do converse with their elders they are much more polite in their use of language. Respect is also taught in relation to cattle. The Luo slaughter their cattle on special occasions, such as the celebration of the death of an elder.

The hierarchy that includes age and social status influences many factors within the society: the arrangement of the houses, villages, position of seating at ritual ceremonies and sacrifices. The oldest member of the family almost always leads the group, unless it has been proven that this elder is unfit in the customary fashions. The purpose of the Luo education seems to revolve around raising and cultivating brave, educated and respectful individuals.

Religion

Customary Luo religion featured a central deity, Nyasaye (translation for God), who is the creator of humanity and the universe. Today, approximately 90 percent of the Luo are Christians, but many still engage in customary rituals. Luo funerals are still extravagant affairs, reflecting the time-honored role of ancestor worship in unifying lineages. In addition, Luo have founded a number of independent Christian churches.

Traditional Homesteads (dala)

Traditionally, Luo people lived in homestead compounds in large, extended families. However, this tradition has been disappearing since the 1950's, and is only rarely seen in communities.

Traditional Luo culture allowed for polygamous marriages, and the size of a compound was generally relative to the number of wives a man could afford. It was easy to determine how many wives and children a man had by counting the number of huts in his homestead.

Traditional homestead compounds were circular and represented the center of being. A natural vegetative fence of Euphorbia trees bound the homestead, with a formal gate facing west, or toward the nearest body of water.

The husband built a home for his first wife directly opposite the main gate. The home of the second wife was located to her left, the home of the third to her right, and so on. The first-born son of each wife built a home in the northwest corner of the homestead. The location of these homes was intended to provide security from intruders or marauding animals. The second-born sons built in the southwest corner, and aided in the defense of the compound. All of the female children were married out of the homestead by dowry. The youngest son inherited his father's homestead and his brothers eventually moved out and established their own.

This homestead design embodied a social pattern devised to eliminate friction, to assign every member of the family his or her rightful place, and to ensure an orderly inheritance when the patriarch died. The system of the Luo homestead was formed in recognition of elemental conflicts between wives, their ambitions for their sons, and potential jealousies within polygamous households.

Anthropologically, this settlement pattern allowed one to peer into the homestead and garner a great deal about the family composition. Upon arriving at an unfamiliar homestead, a villager knew instinctively which house to seek.

Traditionally, when a person died, the body was buried in his or her hut. Although this is no longer practiced, the body of the deceased is still buried within the homestead and the individual's hut remains unoccupied to erode over time. If someone dies away from home (in a different town or city), large sums of money, often entire life savings, are spent in order to return their body to their homestead for burial. It is taboo to bury one away from his or her homestead, even if he or she did not live there at the time of death.

Luo Huts

The majority of homes in a village are constructed using traditional, indigenous building materials. These include rammed mud, wattle, raw timbers, cane, dung, sisal, and grass thatched roofs. Traditional houses are built with raw timbers, and have earthen walls with a space between the top of the wall and the bottom of the roof to provide ventilation. The roof is often extended one meter beyond the walls in order to provide shade.

Building methods are simple and basic due to a scarcity of tools. Lack of electricity prevents the use of power tools, and lack of capital prevents the acquisition of more sophisticated hand tools. Most buildings are constructed using just a hammer and machete or handsaw, with nails or sisal, an indigenous plant, as fasteners.

In recent years, people have introduced metal roofs, dimensional lumber, glass windows and wooden doors to local structures. Some of the larger buildings, for example churches and schools, are constructed of brick and concrete block walls and poured concrete slab floors.

The interior layout of the house follows a traditional plan, and the occupant of each room is predetermined. The positions of the sleeping room, sitting room, and food storage are common among all traditional Luo homes, and kitchens are typically located outside on a veranda or in a small building nearby.

The kitchen is the Luo woman's domain. In the kitchen of a traditional homestead, storage vessels line raised platforms, and food and utensils are suspended overhead by woven rope. Firewood was stored under the veranda and a grinding stone was placed to the right of the door. Rarely do you see a home that still has a grinding stone.

The sleeping area, on the left side of the house, is separated from the sitting area by a high wall. This is the most private zone of the home, to be occupied by only the husband, wife, and small children. The sitting room, located on the other side of the wall, is more public. The seating arrangements within this room are predetermined. For example, the man of the house sits opposite the front door.

Daily Routines

Observing the daily routines of different segments of Luo society is a window into the mechanics of the culture. There is a clear discrepancy in workload based on gender. The Luo female is responsible for virtually every aspect of daily life, from gardening and harvesting to cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Male duties include building the home and plowing the fields.

Villagers travel considerable distances on a daily basis to obtain water. Women often travel up to two hours every day to collect this basic necessity. During the dry season, many people are forced to pay for water.

Education

Education is an important aspect of the Luo people's culture. Often considered the intellectuals in Kenya, the Luo believe that each individual is educated from the moment of birth until death. The Luo maintain the belief that the sum of all experiences moulds attitudes and determines the conduct of both the child and the adult.

When it comes to professions, some are available to all. For example, the job of a blacksmith may be passed down from generation to generation. The blacksmith would teach his son what he knows, thus continuing the cycle of knowledge.

Other professions, however, are not available to all people. The Luo believe that certain jobs require an inherent skill, one which cannot be taught. The job of the medicine man is a good example. When a person is taught the skills necessary to hold one of these positions, the Luo have specific goals in order for them to succeed in their education. They hope to provide a practical education, which is intended to enable the student to assist in the production of material wealth as a grown man. They also aim to teach the traditions, customs, and history of their ancestors. They wish to maintain the Luo way of life, respect and honor, and to maintain the identity of the group.

The Luo people are quick to break into song, their children wear smiles, and even orphans find reason to laugh. In the quest of a viable future for themselves and their children, the Luo people are strongly committed to an enduring and sustainable society that will preserve valuable traditions from the past.