EMPOWER IMPACT KENYA CBO

THE ROOTS OF HOMA BAY

The Heritage of the Luo of Homa Bay County —
Its Elders, Traditions, Values, and the Old Way of Life



Nyangweso · Homa Bay County · Kenya

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An Empower Impact Kenya CBO Heritage Book

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This book was compiled from published historical, anthropological, and oral-literature sources, each cited in the Sources and Further Reading section. Oral traditions are presented as the people's own stories and are marked as such throughout. Dholuo words and proverbs follow the published sources named in the text, above all Asenath Bole Odaga's Luo Proverbs and Sayings.

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The questions in the final chapter are an open invitation: elders and families who hold answers, corrections, names, and stories are asked to share them with Empower Impact Kenya CBO so that the next edition of this book can carry Nyangweso's own voice in full.

Foreword — Why This Book Exists

A man cannot teach what he does not know. A community cannot revive what it cannot remember. And a heritage that lives only in the memory of the old will leave with them when they go.

That is why this book was made.

Empower Impact Kenya CBO works in Nyangweso, in Karachuonyo, Homa Bay County — Luo land, on the shore of the great lake. Everything our CBO does, from the chicken houses to the schoolgirls' dignity kits, stands on one conviction: a community that pulls together is stronger than a community scattered. That conviction is not new. It is the oldest thing we own. Our grandfathers had a word for the strength of standing together — riwruok — and institutions to match it: the work party that raised a neighbor's roof and weeded a widow's field, the council of elders under the tree, the grandmother's house where the children were taught by firelight, the law of the table that fed the stranger at the gate before greeting him.

Much of that world is documented — written down by scholars, missionaries, elders, and the people's own historians over the past hundred years. Much of it was never written at all, and lives now only in the oldest among us. This book gathers the documented record into one place, honestly: what is proven is told as fact, what is the people's own story is told as their story, and what no book could verify is not invented — it is written down as a question, and the questions are given their own chapter at the end, because the elders of Nyangweso are the only press that ever printed those pages.

Read this book to learn. Then close it, and go and sit with an elder. The roots of Homa Bay do not die. They only wait for rain.

— The Officers of Empower Impact Kenya CBO
Nyangweso, Homa Bay County

How to Read This Book

The plain text is the documented record — customs, dates, and events drawn from published sources, which are named in the Sources section. Where the sources disagreed with each other, this book prints the disagreement rather than hiding it.

The People's Story panels carry oral tradition — the migrations, heroes, and wonders as the people themselves have told them for generations. They are the community's treasure and its memory. They are set apart in panels so that no reader mistakes a beloved story for a proven fact, and no one mistakes a proven fact for all there is to know.

Roots to Remember panels close every chapter with its heart in a few lines — for teaching, for reading aloud, and for carrying into the week.

Dholuo words are printed in italics, spelled as the published sources spell them. Proverbs are given in Dholuo first, then in English, with their meaning — because a proverb carried in two languages is carried twice as far.

The final chapter, **Questions Only Our Elders Can Answer**, is not an ending. It is the book's open door. Take it on your elder visits. Ask the oldest first. Write the answers down the same day. Those answers are the first pages of the next edition.

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Part One — The Land and the People

My name is Edwin Mokoro, and I chair a small community organization in Nyangweso — but in this book I am first of all a student. The elders of my own home ground carry in their memories a country I never lived in, and before I can teach any of it, or help bring any of it back, I must learn it myself, slowly and honestly. So we begin where every Luo story begins: with the land, and with the people who came to it.

Chapter 1 — The Deep Story: Where the Luo Came From



The land this book is about: Lake Victoria at Homa Bay, the town shore, and Homa Hill across the water. Photo: RogerCroti via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

A River-Lake Nilotic People

The Luo of Kenya are a River-Lake Nilotic people. That dry-sounding phrase carries a long journey inside it. The wider Luo-speaking family — the Acholi, the Alur, the Jopadhola, the Jopaluo and others, spread today across South Sudan, northern Uganda, eastern Congo and western Kenya — traces its movements to the region of southern Sudan, with Luo groups pushing southward in waves from roughly the 1400s onward. The Kenyan Luo are the southernmost branch of that long migration: the branch that came farthest, and stayed.

The standard scholarly account of that journey remains Bethwell A. Ogot's History of the Southern Luo, Vol. 1: Migration and Settlement, 1500–1900, published by the East African Publishing House in 1967. Ogot built his history from clan traditions collected across Luoland, and more than half a century later it is still the reference every later history argues with. This chapter follows his road — but it begins where the people themselves begin: not with a date, but with a man who fell from the sky.

Pause over the scale of that road, because it is easy to read past. From the 1400s to the 1600s and beyond — five centuries of movement, generation after generation, each wave settling a while, putting down roots, and then sending its own sons farther south. The Luo did not migrate the way an army marches, in one body under one command. They migrated the way a river spreads: in streams, in seasons, in families. And the people of Homa Bay stand at the far end of that long spreading — the southernmost Luo of all. Every clan name in Chapter 3 of this part is a milepost on that road. Every elder who can still recite his line of descent is carrying a map of it in his mouth. That is why this book treats the old people of Nyangweso with such seriousness: a chairman who loses his elders loses his archive, and a people that loses its archive must take its history from other people's books.

Podho, Who Fell from the Sky

> **The People's Story**
>
> In the beginning of the people's own telling stands **Podho** — also written Apodho or Opodho — the first Luo on earth. He did not walk into the world; he fell into it, and his name is tied to the word for falling. He landed on a hill called Got Ramogi in the old homeland, and he did not come empty-handed: he carried the seeds of all trees, plants and animals. From Podho the line runs down through the generations to Ramogi, the ancestor who led the people south.

This is not a story invented in modern times for modern purposes. It was written down in the early 1900s by Archdeacon Walter Edwin Owen of the Church Missionary Society at Maseno, who sat with three named elders and recorded what they told him: Ogada Ondiek of Sakwa, Ogada Otiende of Kisumu, and Gor Kogalo of South Nyanza — that is, Gor Mahia of Kanyamwa himself, the most famous elder South Nyanza ever produced. The tradition reaches the written record through the mouth of a man whose own story fills a later chapter of this book. And it is still told with authority today: in 2023, at the installation of Odungi Randa as Ker of the Luo Council of Elders, Raila Odinga narrated the Podho tradition publicly, basing himself explicitly on Owen's writings.

Hold the story the way historians hold it. Scholars treat Podho as a telescoped, semi-legendary forefather — a single name under which many generations of movement have been folded — not as a datable individual. Ogot himself noted that the tidy scheme of one forefather is partly a later systematizing of messier clan

histories. So learn Podho as what he truly is: the people's own account of their beginning. Taught that way, he loses nothing. Taught as a dated historical person, the story would claim more than any evidence can carry.

There is a second lesson in how this story reached us. The chain that carried Podho across the centuries was oral — grandfather to grandson, elder to elder — until, in the early 1900s, one link of the chain was a missionary's notebook. Owen came to Luoland to change the people's religion, and he ended up preserving their beginning. The written history of the Luo starts, again and again, in exactly this unlikely way: the tradition survives because somebody, at the last responsible moment, wrote it down. That is the work this book is part of, and it is the work now waiting in Nyangweso, where the notebooks have not yet been opened.

The Spear and the Bead: Gipir and Labongo

> **The People's Story**
>
> Before the Luo reached Kenya, tradition places them at Pubungu, near modern Pakwach in northern Uganda, where two brothers lived: **Gipir** (Nyipir) and **Labongo** (Nyabongo). One brother borrowed the other's spear and speared an elephant, and the animal ran off with the spear in its body; the spear had to be retrieved or replaced at great cost. Then the other brother's small child swallowed a royal bead, and the bead was demanded back — in the harshest telling, it was recovered by cutting the child open. After such debts and such griefs, the brothers agreed they could no longer live together. They parted at a place called **Wang-Lei** — "where the axe was cast" — about 400 meters from today's Pakwach Bridge, where an axe was cast or buried in the Nile to seal the separation. From that parting descend the Alur, west of the Nile, and the Acholi and the wider Luo, east and south of it.

This tradition can be cited to an official document, not to retellings alone: Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development recorded Wang-Lei in a 2021 inventory form for UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. But one caution belongs with the story, and it teaches something by itself. The Alur and Acholi tellings disagree about which brother wronged which. Each side remembers the quarrel from its own bank of the river. That disagreement is not a flaw in the tradition; it is part of the tradition — a reminder that every people's story is told from where that people stands.

Notice, too, the shape of the parting itself. The brothers did not fall on each other with spears. They reckoned the debts — a spear lost, a bead swallowed, a child grieved — concluded that the account between them could no longer be settled inside one homestead, and they sealed a separation with a cast axe and a river between them. The tradition remembers the founding split of the Luo world not as a war but as a sorrowful agreement. Peoples who tell such a story about their own beginning carry, inside the story, a teaching about how irreconcilable things were once handled: honestly, formally, and without blood.

Ramogi Ajwang and the Hill That Bears His Name

The ancestor who anchors Kenyan Luo identity is **Ramogi Ajwang**. In Ogot's reconstruction, the first and largest migration wave — the **Joka-Jok**, "the people of Jok" — settled **Ramogi Hill, Got Ramogi**, which rises 4,824 feet in Kadimo, in today's Siaya County, bounded by the River Yala to the east, the Yala swamp to the north, and Lake Victoria to the west. Ogot dates the Joka-Jok arrival to roughly **1490–1517**; his wider window for the wave runs from 1490 to 1600.

Notice what Ogot stresses, because the book should keep it: the first Luo entry into northern Nyanza was not a conquest. The traditions preserve no memory of wars or encounters at that first settlement. The newcomers appear to have been absorbed into, and to have absorbed, a thinly peopled land. The Luo story in Kenya begins not with a sword but with a settling.

From Got Ramogi the Joka-Jok radiated outward like the spokes of a wheel: one party east across the Yala into Alego; the Chwanya group south into Uyoma; the Nyikal into Sakwa and Asembo; the Julu to Ong'ielo Hill; the Oywa north toward Nyakach. And they were only the first of four waves in Ogot's scheme: after the Joka-Jok (c. 1490–1517) came **Jok'Owiny** and **Jok'Omolo** (1598–1625), and then a later, miscellaneous wave that in some accounts includes the Luo-Abasuba, the Jokawango. Wave after wave, over two centuries and more, the people came down to the lake and along its shores — until some of them crossed the gulf itself, as the next chapter tells.

Honesty requires a footnote here, and the book gives it gladly. Celia Nyamweru's study of Kenya's sacred natural sites (Journal of Eastern African Studies, 2012) records the complications. C. W. Hobley, collecting origin stories in the early 1900s, heard that Apodho — "the 'Adam' of the Luo" — lived on a Ramogi hill in Uganda, and that his son Ramogi migrated south to the Kadimo hill. Ogot suggested that Kenya's Ramogi Hill may carry what he called a "reminiscent name, like New York" — an older Lamogi hill stood in the Agoro/Labwor area of Uganda, and the name may have traveled south with the people. Other versions say Ramogi

himself never reached Kenya at all, and that the man who settled Got Ramogi was **Idi**, a great-grandson of Ramogi, who found the hill on a hunting expedition from Ligala. In public speech the hill is simply Ker Ramogi Ajwang's first fortified settlement. Both belong in this book: the popular identification, and the scholarly footnote beside it.

The Hill Today

Got Ramogi is not a ruin. It remains a sacred site, with hembko — shrines — upon it. The people of Kadimo point to its named features: the **Rapogi Stone**, the altar where Ramogi is said to have prayed for rain in drought; **Kar Dhiang**, rocks shaped like cattle, where his herd is said to have grazed; pong grinding stones attributed to his household; **Mwanda Point**, where he first entered the area; and a tree called "Omwonyo Le" — the axe-swallower — which could not be cut down. Four traditional huts stand on the hill for the four Luo counties: Siaya, Kisumu, Migori and Homa Bay. Our county's hut stands there. Homa Bay's road south begins on that hill, and the hill has kept a place for Homa Bay.

And the hill still gathers the people. From **31 December 2024 to 2 January 2025**, Got Ramogi hosted the **Piny Luo festival**, at which Ker Odungi Randa crowned Presidents William Ruto of Kenya and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda as Luo elders, presenting each with an elder's seat, crown, cloth, shield, spear and whisk. At that festival, Raila Odinga said the Joka-Jok settled at Got Ramogi "800 years ago." Set that beside Ogot's dating of about 1490 — roughly 530 years — and do not try to force the two to agree. Ogot's dating is the scholarly position and is what this book prints; the larger figure is the rhetoric of a public occasion. A heritage that cannot tell the difference between its scholarship and its speeches will soon lose both.

The Peoples Already There

The Luo did not enter an empty land. Ogot's own verdict is that the Luo are a **"hybrid population,"** assembled over centuries of assimilation — and nowhere is that clearer than in South Nyanza. Three encounters matter for Homa Bay.

First, the **Kiseru**. When the Luo crossed the gulf, a Bantu people close in kin to the Abagusii were already living in South Nyanza. Most Kiseru were absorbed so completely that their descendants today speak Dholuo, intermarry with Luo, and carry Luo clan affiliations — the Karachuonyo-linked names Karachuonyo/Wanjare and Konyango Rabala are cited as examples. Across the border in North Mara, in Tanzania, Kiseru remnants still speak Ekegusii ("Ekigasi") or Bunchari, and that language is endangered. Historians count some Kiseru clans — Karachuonyo,

Kowidi, Wanjare, Wawaria — among the Jo-Kajok. Hear what this means for us at home: part of "Luo" Karachuonyo ancestry is, on the historians' own showing, Bantu in origin — Luo by adoption and by language. Nyangweso's own clan was gathered before it was born.

Second, the eastern neighbors: the **Gusii**, a Bantu people, and the **Kipsigis**, a Kalenjin people, along Karachuonyo's eastern frontier — peoples with whom the Luo traded, fought, and intermarried along a long border, as Theodora Ayot's historical texts record. A frontier in the old way was not a wall. It was a place of markets and marriages as much as of raids, and the peoples along it knew one another's languages, prices and tempers. Third, to the west and on the islands, the **Suba** — a whole chapter of this part (Chapter 4) is theirs.

The lesson stands exactly as the elders' wisdom would have it: "pure" origins are a myth the record does not support. Luo identity was built by gathering people in — absorbing them, marrying them, giving them clan names and a language and a place at the fire. That is, not coincidentally, the oldest form of the togetherness this whole book exists to revive. The roots were never a wall. They were always a door.

Roots to Remember

- The Kenyan Luo are the southernmost branch of a River-Lake Nilotic people who moved south from the Sudan region in waves from about the 1400s.
- Podho, who fell from the sky, is the people's own account of their beginning — recorded from named elders, among them Gor Mahia himself — and is taught as tradition, not as a dated life.
- Ramogi Ajwang's Joka-Jok settled Got Ramogi in Kadimo around 1490–1517, and the traditions remember no conquest there — a settling, not a sword.
- The Luo are, in Ogot's word, a "hybrid population": Karachuonyo itself carries Bantu Kiseru ancestry, Luo by adoption and language.
- Got Ramogi still stands as the people's meeting place, with a hut on its summit for Homa Bay among the four Luo counties.

Chapter 2 — The Crossing of the Gulf

The Witness of the Elders

How do we know how the Homa Bay clans came south? Not from colonial files — the files begin later, and they begin with taxes. We know it because a scholar went and sat with the elders while the memory was still warm. The fullest account comes from **Theodora O. Ayot**, whose South Nyanza Historical Texts, Vol. I (preserved in the University of Nairobi repository) rests on field research in **1976–78** among the clans of Kanyamwa, Kabuoch, Karungu, Kadera, Kwabwai, Kanyadoto, Kanyikela, Kanyada, Kochia, Kagan, Gem, Karachuonyo, Kabondo/Kasipul, Kamagambo, Sakwa and others. Read that list slowly: it is the clan map of today's Homa Bay County. Ayot's informants were elders whose grandparents' generation still carried the migration memory at first hand — men and women who had heard the crossing described by people who had heard it from the crossers' own children. Her 1990 Kenyatta University PhD thesis, The Position of Women in the Luo Society: Case Study of Jok'Onyango A.D. 1750–1920, is where she dates and orders the movement.

This matters beyond one chapter. Almost everything in Part One of this book that is more than a generation old passed through a chain like that one: elder to elder, mouth to ear, until a writer — Owen, Ogot, Ayot, Paul Mboya — set it down. The chain is the archive. When the last link of a local chain breaks unrecorded, a library burns that no one saw smoking.

The First Crossings

Ayot's texts give the movement a date and a doorway. The first Luo groups in present-day South Nyanza were **Joka-Jok arriving from AD 1688 onward**, and they entered by water: they **crossed the lake at the Uyoma peninsula**, on the gulf's northern shore, and came down into the southern country. They settled **Kanyamwa, Kadem, Karungu and Karachuonyo** — names that are on the county map today. These first crossers are also called **Joka-Chwanya**, or **Jok'Onyango** — and the Jok'Onyango name still covers the Ndhiwa clans of Chapter 3.

Picture what the crossing meant. These were not armies on a campaign; they were households on the move — cattle people and cultivators carrying seed, tools, and the names of their fathers, crossing an arm of the great lake in the boats of the time, looking for land where a dala could be founded and a lineage could take root.

South Nyanza was not conquered in a season. It was settled the way a tree is planted: scout, crossing, foothold, then the slow spread of roots.

Two Roads South



The water the crossers came over: Lake Victoria near Kendu Bay, on the Karachuonyo shore. Photo: SuSanA Secretariat via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0).

Citing Ogot (1967, p. 207), Ayot's account has the Joka-Jok entering South Nyanza in two groupings. The first grouping carried the ancestors of modern **Karachuonyo, Kasipul, Kabondo and Kano**, and they settled first around **Kendu Bay** — the deep bay on the gulf's southern shore, in Karachuonyo's own country. Let the home reader feel the weight of that: the country of Karachuonyo, Kasipul and Kabondo was not a later offshoot of the settlement, settled when the best land was gone. It was a first landing — one of the two doors by which the Joka-Jok entered the south. Nyangweso stands in some of the oldest Luo country south of the gulf. The second grouping was **Jo-Kanyamwa, Jo-Kabuoch, Jo-Kadem and Jo-Karungu**.

And here the record does something honest that this book will not hide: it disagrees with itself. Ogot wrote that the second group traveled via **Asego** — that is, by way of Homa Bay. But the oral traditions Ayot collected say instead that these groups stayed at Kanyamwa after crossing at Uyoma, and dispersed from

there. Two roads south, both carried by serious witnesses. This book preserves the discrepancy deliberately, exactly as the research recorded it, because it is the kind of question the elders of the home ground may still be able to speak to — and because a book that irons out every disagreement in the record is teaching its readers to distrust it.

The Land Was Not Empty

One thing the crossing was not: a landing on empty shores. Chapter 1 has already named the Kiseru, the Bantu people close in kin to the Abagusii, who were living in South Nyanza when the Luo crossed the gulf — and who were absorbed so thoroughly that their descendants are Luo today, some of them inside Karachuonyo itself. The Suba held the islands and the western shore. The Gusii and Kipsigis stood on the eastern frontier. So the settlement of the south was never a simple filling of vacant land. It was a weaving: Luo households entering a peopled country, and being changed by it even as they changed it — marrying into it, trading with it, sometimes fighting it, and over generations becoming one people with it. The crossing story and the absorption story are the same story told from two banks, and this book will keep telling them together.

Scouts, Landings, and Fighting

The crossing had its order. Karachuonyo scouts had visited South Nyanza before the main crossing — the land was known before it was taken up. Then a larger Karachuonyo party under a leader named **Oyange** landed at **Kanam, near Got Huma** — the hill above today's Homa Bay town. Hold that name: Kanam, under Got Huma, is one of the first named landing places of the whole South Nyanza settlement, and Chapter 5 returns to the hill.

Nor was the movement peaceful everywhere, whatever the quiet of the first settlement at Got Ramogi. In Uyoma, fighting broke out between Jokobunga — Kabuoch and Kanyamwa people — and an alliance of Karachuonyo and Gem, before the lake crossings were complete. The settlement of the south was made by negotiation, absorption, intermarriage — and, where those failed, by the spear.

The order of the later movements is remembered precisely. **Kochia followed Karachuonyo south, then Kanyada followed Kochia** — clan after clan coming down the same road, each into country the one before had opened. Kochia's move is remembered as driven by land pressure and population growth: the oldest reason in the world for a people to move, and the reason that still empties and fills villages today. Jo-Kano moved with Jo-Karachuonyo. Jo-Gem, of the Nyokal group,

came later, after the Joka-Chwanya were already settled — Gem's own long road is told in Chapter 3.

The People's Story

The clan map of Homa Bay County is, in the people's own telling, the map of four brothers' descendants. **Jok**, son of Ramogi, and his wife **Awandu** had four sons: **Chwanya Rakwar, Nyasgenga, Omwa, and Karachuonyo**. Chwanya — who was taken in by Waondo — became the ancestor of the Jok lineages of Kanyamwa, Kadem, Karungu and Kabuoch. Omwa became the ancestor of lineages in the Klaumo area. And Karachuonyo, the fourth son, gave his name to the clan in which Nyangweso stands. (Genealogy as recorded in Ayot's historical texts.)

Whether a chairman reads that genealogy as literal descent or as the people's way of drawing their relationships, its teaching is the same: the clans of this county are not strangers who happen to share a border. In their own account of themselves, they are brothers' children. The county was a family before it was an administration — and families, unlike administrations, have obligations.

Roots to Remember

- Our knowledge of the crossing rests on Ayot's 1976–78 field research among Homa Bay's own clans — elder testimony recorded while the chain of memory was still warm.
- The first Luo groups entered South Nyanza from AD 1688 onward, crossing the lake at the Uyoma peninsula, and settled Kanyamwa, Kadem, Karungu and Karachuonyo.
- The record honestly disagrees on the second group's road — Ogot says via Asego (Homa Bay); the oral traditions say they stayed at Kanyamwa and dispersed from there.
- Karachuonyo scouts came first; the main party under Oyange landed at Kanam, near Got Huma above today's Homa Bay town.
- In the people's own telling, the county's clans descend from four sons of Jok and Awandu — brothers' children, not strangers.

Chapter 3 — The Clans and Peoples of Homa Bay

Homa Bay County today has eight constituencies and sub-counties — Mbita, Ndhiwa, Homa Bay Town, Rangwe, Karachuonyo, Kabondo Kasipul, Kasipul, and Suba North and South. But the county's real map is older than any constituency boundary: it is the clan map. A 2020 clan survey, "Rwothdoms: Clans of the Luo People of Kenya and Tanzania" — building on Ocholla-Ayayo's term rwothdom and on Ogot — lists seventeen clans for Homa Bay County. Among them: Karachuonyo, Kasipul, Kabondo, Kagan, Gem, Kochia, Kanyada, Kanyamwa, Kabuoch, Kanyikela, Kanyadoto, Kwabwai, Gwassi, Kaksingri, Kasgunga and Rusinga. Nyangweso, this CBO's home, lies in **Karachuonyo**. We begin there.

Notice the relationship between the two maps. Constituency boundaries in this county were redrawn as recently as 2013, and they will be redrawn again; the clan names on the older map have not changed since the crossings of Chapter 2. A man may not know which constituency his grandfather voted in, but he knows his clan, his sub-clan, and the ancestor they carry — and he will correct a stranger who gets them wrong. Administrations are weather. The clan map is climate. Anyone who wants to work in this county — to gather its people, to teach them, to lead them — works on the clan map or does not work at all.

Karachuonyo — The Home Clan

Karachuonyo takes its name from the ancestor **Rachuonyo**, and the Jo-Karachuonyo are Joka-Jok who, in Ayot's texts, "came directly from Sudan and settled around Got Ramogi" before crossing south. Ayot's texts divide the clan into **Jo-piny** — the descendants of Rachuonyo himself — and other incorporated lines. Even the home clan, then, is a gathered people, consistent with the Kiseru absorption of Chapter 1: a core lineage, and lines that joined it and became it.

That structure deserves a chairman's attention, because it is the old way's definition of belonging. The incorporated lines of Karachuonyo are not guests in the clan, and they are not second-class members with an asterisk beside their names. They joined, they married in, they buried their dead in the clan's ground, and they became Karachuonyo — fully, in a generation or two. The home clan itself was built the way the whole Luo people was built: by gathering. When this book later speaks of pulling a community together, it is not importing a foreign idea and dressing it in local clothes. It is describing the process by which Karachuonyo itself came to exist.

In the colonial-era geography Ayot records, Karachuonyo was a country in itself. Lower Karachuonyo — the Kaduong locations: East, Central, South and West —

and Upper Karachuonyo — East, Central and West Kasipul and Kabondo — together covered some **2,400 square kilometers**, with a **1969 census population of about 184,090**, forming the Eastern Division of South Nyanza District. When a Karachuonyo elder speaks of "our country," this is the scale he means.

> **The People's Story**
>
> The clan tells its founder's story like this. **Rachuonyo** was lost as a child and survived alone in the papyrus reeds, fishing and hunting, until he was taken in by Nyakwar, Ogelo and Chien. He settled with Chien, and by the levirate custom he inherited Chien's last wife, **Omieri**. He was a hunter who traded meat for grain and cattle, and the trade made him wealthy; he married eight wives, and their sons founded the Jo-Karachuonyo sub-clans. His famous son by Omieri, **Sipul**, quarreled with Chien's sons and left — and Sipul fathered the lines that lead to **Kabondo**, through Omala, and to **Kasipul**, through Owidi. That is why Karachuonyo, Kasipul and Kabondo still reckon themselves one family. Another clan tradition holds that Rachuonyo's first wife, Owaga Nyaluo, agreed to marry him on one condition: that his lower teeth were removed — tying the founding ancestor himself to nak, the tooth-removal initiation of the old way. (This is the clan's own story, widely retold; its written sources are low-tier, and it is given here as the clan tells it.)

Kasipul — The People of Sipul, Once Called Mumbo

Kasipul is named for the descendants of **Sipul**. Ayot's texts give it three locations — West (Kotieno and neighbors), Central (Konyango and neighbors) and East (Kojwach and neighbors) — bordered by Kabondo to the east, the Kisii country to the south, and Karachuonyo to the west and north. Her texts insist on a point this book repeats as a rule for all clan history: "the history of Kasipul is not an island in itself." It cannot be told apart from Kabondo and Karachuonyo, because it did not happen apart from them.

Kasipul also carries an older identity name: **Mumbo**. A Kasipul person is a Jamumbo — the 2020 clan survey and local corrective writing agree on this. Keep the name and its meaning straight, because the warning matters: the clan's old name Mumbo is one thing, and the Mumbo religious movement that swept the region in the colonial years is a different thing entirely. Same word, different worlds; confusing them scrambles both histories.

Kabondo — The People of Omala

Kabondo's historical identity name is **Komala**, from the ancestor **Omala**; a Kabondo man is a Jakomala. Local usage still polices the boundary precisely — it resents the error of calling a Kasipul man by that name. A small thing, and a telling one: clan identity in this county is not folklore decoration. It is a fact people correct you on, the way they would correct their own name mispronounced.

Administratively, the old Rachuonyo District held a combined Kasipul Kabondo constituency until 2013, when devolution-era boundaries split it into the separate Kasipul and Kabondo Kasipul constituencies — the newest line on a map whose oldest lines were drawn by the descendants of one man's sons.

Kanyada — The Clan of Homa Bay Town

Kanyada is the clan of the Homa Bay town area — today's Homa Bay Town sub-county — with its own chapter in Ayot's texts. Its traditions interweave with Karachuonyo's, as neighbors' traditions do: one recorded line has a Karachuonyo woman married into Kanyada among the Jo-Kokidi, her son Dumu giving the Kodumo clan its name. That particular text survives in partially garbled form, so the book notes the interweaving as certain and the detail as to be handled with care. What is not in doubt: Kanyada is the clan on whose land Chich Onuno market stood — the market that became today's Homa Bay town, the county capital. The capital of the county stands on Kanyada ground, under Kanyada's hill.

Ndhiwa — Kanyamwa and Its Neighbors

The Ndhiwa area is a cluster of Jok'Onyango clans: **Kanyamwa** — the people of Gor Mahia, whose story fills a later chapter — together with **Kabuoch, Kwabwai, Kanyikela and Kadera**. These are the same names that appear in Ayot's crossing account in Chapter 2: the first settlers' list and the modern sub-county's clan list are one list, read at a distance of three centuries.

Rangwe — Kochia, Kagan, Gem

The Rangwe area clans — **Kochia, Kagan and Gem** — belong largely to the **Jok'Omolo** cluster of Ogot's second migration wave (1598–1625). Kochia's sub-clans are listed as Kaura, Kanam, Kamenya, Kowili and Korayo. Kochia came south following Karachuonyo, its move remembered as driven by land pressure and population growth.

Gem's own road was the longest of all. In the traditions summarized from Ogot, Gem's route ran from the Pawir/Bunyoro side, through Banda — where tradition

says the Luo learned to make the great war shields, kuodi, later carried in the South Nyanza expansion — then through Samia and Kadimo, into western Alego under **Rading Omolo (c. 1760–1820)**, and only then south across the gulf to its present home. A clan's address, in this county, is the last line of its migration story.

The Chiefs: Where Clan History Meets the Written Record

Under British indirect rule, the colonial state governed the clans through appointed chiefs — and with the chiefs, clan history enters the written record by name. A Moi University thesis, "The Socio-Economic and Political Transformational Roles of Colonial Chiefs among the Southern Nyanza Luo of Homa Bay County, Kenya (1890–1963)," names the notable chiefs of the area: **Gor Ogalo of Kanyamwa** — Gor Mahia himself, holding a chief's office in the documented record and not only in legend; **Paul Mboya of Karachuonyo** — the same Paul Mboya who wrote Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi in 1938, the foundational written account of Luo custom on which so much of this book's later parts rest; **Kasuku Matunga of Gwassi**; and **Gideon Magak of Kasipul-Kabondo**. The study's ground — Gwassi, Kanyamwa, Kanyada, Karachuonyo, Kochia, Gem, Kasipul-Kabondo — is simply the clan map of this chapter, walked by a researcher.

For this book, the chiefs are a precious hinge. The generation that carried the oral tradition in memory was the same generation the colonial state wrote into its files. Men like Paul Mboya stood with a foot in both worlds: chief in the record book, elder at the hearth — and, in Mboya's case, the man who picked up the pen and wrote the customs down himself, so that a chairman in Nyangweso could read them a century later. When we teach from Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi, we are not reading about the elders. We are reading one.

Roots to Remember

- The county's real map is the clan map — seventeen clans, older than any constituency, and Nyangweso stands in Karachuonyo.
- Karachuonyo, Kasipul and Kabondo reckon themselves one family, descended through Sipul, son of Rachuonyo and Omieri.
- Kasipul's older name is Mumbo and Kabondo's is Komala — identity names still guarded precisely today, and not to be confused with later movements of similar name.
- Homa Bay town stands on Kanyada land; Ndhiwa's clans are the Jok'Onyango of the first crossing; Rangwe's Kochia, Kagan and Gem came largely with the second wave.
- Paul Mboya of Karachuonyo — colonial chief and author of Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi (1938) — is the hinge between the elders' memory and the written record.

Chapter 4 — The Suba: The Other First People

Who the Abasuba Are

No honest book of Homa Bay's roots can tell the Luo story alone, because the Luo were not the only first people of this county. The **Abasuba** are a Bantu people — but, like the Luo themselves, a gathered one: an amalgam of clans drawn from the **Ganda, Soga and Luhya** peoples of Uganda. The 2019 census counted **157,787** Abasuba in Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics). Keep that number; Chapter 4 returns to it, because it is often misused.

The Abasuba migrated from Buganda and Busoga between the mid-17th and 18th centuries, fleeing succession conflicts. The sharpest single episode in the record is Theodora Ayot's: flight after the murder of **Kabaka Junju, around 1760** (Ayot, History of the Luo-Abasuba, 1979). They settled **Rusinga and Mfangano islands** and the mainland shore at **Gembe, Gwassi and Kaksingri** — today's Suba South — with pockets reaching toward Migori and Muhuru Bay. They are often described as the last major people to settle in what is now Kenya. The islanders call themselves **Eluzinga**, or **'Chula** — "people of the islands."

Place the Suba arrival in the county's full layering, and the map of Part One is complete. The Kiseru were in South Nyanza before the Luo crossed. The Luo waves came down over two centuries and more. The Suba, fleeing Buganda's succession wars, were the last major people to arrive — settling islands and shores the Luo had not taken up, in a country already old with other people's graves. Homa Bay was never one people's empty inheritance. It is a layered country, and every layer has descendants living in it today.



The islands' old livelihood: fishing on Lake Victoria at Rusinga Island. Photo: Ryan Harvey via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0).

The Clans of the Islands

The Suba kept their own clan map, and it is as detailed as the Luo one. Rusinga's clans: **Waware, Kaswanga (Awakiwanga), Wanyama, Waregi, Kamasengre (Awamasengere), Wasaki, and Ngodhe (Awangoze)**. Mfangano's people, the **Awibuang'ano**: **Wakula, Wasamo, Wagimbe, Wiramba** (kin to the Kakiimba), and **Awisokolwa, Waozi** — with later arrivals, Wayokia, Wakisasi/Awakisori and Wakiara/Wakiala, who came fleeing Luo pressure around Imbo Naya in Central Nyanza, and Kamreri, Kayanja and Waondo in Mirunda Gembe. The **Abasuba Peace Museum** on Mfangano — founded in 2000, with the Trust for African Rock Art and the National Museums of Kenya — records the island's earliest settlers as an amalgam of **Wadira, Walusigge, Wafuluma, Wakienya, Watenga and Wafira** clans, with the famous **Wasano** clan arriving later by way of Central Nyanza.

One caution, because the names invite confusion: the Suna (Girango) people of Migori also call themselves Abasuba, through a different ancestor — Girango's son Musuba — and they are a distinct Luo-Kuria mixture. They are not the island and mainland Abasuba of Homa Bay, and this book does not merge them.

Absorption — and What Survived It

Between roughly **1850 and 1900**, as Luo speakers surrounded the Suba settlements, a thorough assimilation ran through Gwassi, Kaksingri, Kasgunga, Rusinga and Mfangano. Scholars call it **Luoization**. In Luo clan lists, the assimilated Suba appear under Luo-style names: Jo-Gwassi, Jo-Kaksingri, Jo-Kaswanga, Jo-Mfangano, Jo-Wakula, Jo-Kamasengre, Jo-Muhuru, Jo-Suna. The absorption is still audible in those names: a people whose own clan names were Waware and Wasano and Wakula now answer, in the county's daily life, to Luo-style names that begin with Jo- — "the people of." The renaming was not a ceremony anyone voted on. It was the slow outcome of a century of intermarriage, trade, shared markets and shared funerals, until the line between the two peoples ran through families rather than between them. The Abasuba Peace Museum's summary is blunt: the Abasuba "have almost entirely stopped practicing their rituals and adopted the Luo culture."

But "almost" is doing real work in that sentence. Distinct Suba institutions survived, and survive:

- **Male circumcision.** The Luo traditionally did not circumcise; the Suba did, and do. It remains the most visible standing difference between the two peoples — and in the HIV era it acquired a medical significance nobody foresaw.
- **Clan totems** and the **emisambwa** rainmaking shrines.
- **Rock art** — the Mawanga and Kwitone rock art sites on Mfangano, among the oldest human marks in the county.

The Luo reader should sit with this section a while. Chapter 1 showed the Luo gathering other peoples in — Kiseru into Karachuonyo, clan after clan into the Luo world. The Suba chapter shows the same process from the other side: what it feels like, and what it costs, to be the gathered. Absorption built Luoland. It also nearly erased a language. Both things are true, and a heritage book that prints only the first is a celebration, not a history.

The Language That Is Leaving

Olusuba (Kisuba) is a Great Lakes Bantu language, close kin to Luganda. UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (Heine & Brenzinger, eds., 2003) listed Suba as endangered — on the brink of extinction. The documented position today: the language is spoken primarily by people **over fifty**. In Rusinga and Gembe, Dholuo has almost entirely replaced it in everyday communication. Suba survives in private and symbolic uses — rituals, storytelling, greetings of

honor. That pattern — a language retreating first from the market and the road, and last from the ritual and the fireside — is the classic shape of language loss, and it tells you where a language makes its final stand: in the places where the words are not merely useful but owed. A greeting of honor is not information. It is respect made audible. As long as an old man on Rusinga is still greeted in the words of his fathers, the language has a living root, however thin the branches above it have become. The drivers named in the research (Ondiba 2025, citing Obiero 2008/2010) are the dominance of Dholuo, Swahili and English, assimilation through deep integration with Luo communities, geographic dispersion, and economic migration.

And here a refinement the book insists on, from a 2023 phonology study (Aluoch et al.): Dholuo has not deeply corrupted Suba vocabulary. The language is not decaying from inside. Its speakers are **shifting** — choosing Dholuo, for example in order to trade in Luo-majority Homa Bay. Languages die by decisions, not by rot. And decisions can be revisited.

Now the number, handled with care. The figure **157,787** is the ethnic population of the Abasuba from the 2019 census. It is **not** a count of fluent Suba speakers. Fluent speakers are far fewer, and mostly older. Some websites wrongly print 157,787 as the speaker count; this book does not, and neither should anyone who teaches from it. Precision about a small people's numbers is a form of respect.

The Language Coming Back

The Suba story does not end in disappearance. The **Suba Language Project** was founded by the linguist **Prof. Duncan Okoth Okombo (1950–2017)**, whose 1999 paper, "Language and ethnic identity: the case of the Abasuba," made the scholarly case for the language's survival. The **Olusuba Bible** — translation begun in 1988 — was completed and published in **2011**: a whole scripture in a language UNESCO had listed as nearly gone. Suba has entered school curricula in the area, and the **Rusinga Cultural Festival**, held each December since 2012, together with the island's cultural organizations, gives the language and the culture a public stage.

And the recovery has an address. The **Abasuba Peace Museum** on Mfangano — founded in 2000, with the Trust for African Rock Art and the National Museums of Kenya — is the institution that records the island's earliest settler clans and preserves the memory of those who came after. A museum is a people's memory given walls. It declares that what the elders know is worth a building and opening hours, and that grandchildren not yet born have a claim on it. The Suba, a small people surrounded by a far larger Luo majority, built such a house on an island in

the lake. The lesson for the Luo of Homa Bay — millions strong, their traditions still living, their elders still able to speak — needs no softening: what the Abasuba have done from fragments, we are still positioned to do from living memory, if we begin while the rememberers are here.

So the Suba are this book's mirror. The Luo of Homa Bay are being urged to recover what they still have — customs whose last full practitioners are still alive, a language still spoken by millions. The Suba show what it costs when recovery starts a generation later: it can still be done — a Bible, a curriculum, a festival — but it is done uphill, from fragments, by a few stubborn people who refused to let go. Read their chapter as a warning and as an encouragement at once: the work is possible, and the time to do it is while it is still easy.

Roots to Remember

- The Abasuba — a gathered Bantu people from Buganda and Busoga — settled Rusinga, Mfangano, Gembe, Gwassi and Kaksingri, and are counted at 157,787 in the 2019 census.
- Between about 1850 and 1900 the Suba were largely absorbed into the Luo world — yet circumcision, clan totems, the emisambwa shrines and the Mfangano rock art survived.
- Olusuba is endangered and spoken mainly by the over-fifties — not decaying, but being set aside by daily decisions, which means decisions can bring it back.
- 157,787 is the ethnic population, never the speaker count; fluent speakers are far fewer.
- The Olusuba Bible (2011), school curricula and the Rusinga Cultural Festival (since 2012) show a recovery already underway — the mirror image of the Luo task.

Chapter 5 — Sacred Geography: The Land That Remembers

A people's map has two layers. One layer is roads, boundaries and plot numbers. The other is the layer the elders navigate by: the hill where the ancestor prayed, the lake that swallowed a village, the rock shaped like a homestead. This chapter walks the second layer of Homa Bay's map. It begins, as everything in Part One begins, at Got Ramogi — treated fully in Chapter 1, but named again here because no account of Homa Bay's roots can omit it: the hill stands in Siaya County, yet every Homa Bay clan's road south starts there, and the Piny Luo festival of December 2024 – January 2025 showed it functioning again as the whole people's meeting place, with Homa Bay's hut standing among the four.

Simbi Nyaima — The Lake That Swallowed a Village



Lake Simbi Nyaima, the crater lake in Karachuonyo — still water over a drowned village, the people say. Photo: Mikegregs via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

In Karachuonyo, on the Kaksingri side, lies **Simbi Nyaima**, a small crater lake. It is in this CBO's own home country, and its story is the first sermon every Karachuonyo child of the old school would have heard about the duty of receiving the stranger.

The People's Story

There was a village of the Jo-Waswa — a people who were in the area before the present clans — and to that village came a traveling old woman. In some tellings she was a leper woman. She asked for water and for shelter, and the village refused her. Only one household took her in. That night, the village sank, and water covered it, and the lake remains where the village stood. And on still days, the people say, you can still hear the sounds of the drowned village from under the water — voices, cattle, the whole life that would not share.

Keep the two accounts apart, the way this book keeps them everywhere. The geology is its own story: the lake is a volcanic crater, and a sediment-based dating sometimes quoted for it — around 1680 — conflicts between sources, so this book prints neither date as settled. The tale is the tale, and the crater is the crater. But the moral of the tale is pure Roots doctrine, and it needs no geology to support it: the village that would not receive the stranger is the village that sank. Hospitality was not decoration in the old way. It was survival law — and Simbi Nyaima is its courthouse, sitting in Karachuonyo to this day. (The tale and its study: Hayombe et al., 2014.)

One more detail in the tale is easy to miss and worth a chairman's attention: the drowned village belonged to the Jo-Waswa, "a people who were in the area before the present clans." Even Karachuonyo's own sacred story admits that Karachuonyo was not first on its own ground. The land's memory is older than the clans that now carry it — which is precisely why the memory must be carried humbly. We are the latest tellers of Simbi Nyaima's story, not its owners, and the household that took the stranger in is remembered with honor by people who are not even their descendants. Hospitality, the tale insists, echoes longer than ancestry.

Nyamgondho Wuod Ombare — The Wife Who Walked Back into the Lake

> **The People's Story**
>
> At Nyandiwa in Gwassi lived a fisherman named **Nyamgondho Wuod Ombare** — poor, and mocked for his poverty. Then his nets were suddenly full, and his fortunes turned, and the change came with a mysterious wife who had come to him from the lake. She brought wealth into his home on one condition: he must never reveal where she came from, nor taunt her with it. He kept the condition while he was poor and careful. But in drink and in pride he broke his word, and called her the creature from the water — and she walked back into the lake with the wealth, and left him exactly as he was.

The tale was set down in print in Keep My Words by Onyango-Ogutu and Mbayah (1974), and it is the lake country's sermon on two things this community's own teaching returns to constantly: the power of the spoken word, and the keeping of conditions. Wealth that comes with a condition is held by the tongue. Nyamgondho had everything — once — and lost it not to thieves or drought but to his own mouth, in one drunken sentence. The elders who told this story around the fire were not entertaining children. They were legislating.

Homa Hill — Got Huma

The hill above Homa Bay town is **Got Huma**, in the Asego area of Kanyada. It is the county capital's namesake: colonial visitors pronounced "Huma" as "Homa," and the name stuck to the town and then to the county. (The full story of the town's naming belongs to a later part of this book.) For Part One, mark the hill's older significance: in the clan traditions of Chapter 2, Karachuonyo's crossing party under Oyange landed at Kanam, near this hill. Got Huma is therefore one of the first named landing places of the whole South Nyanza settlement — the ground where the county's story steps out of the boat. Every resident of Homa Bay town lives in its shadow, whether or not they know what it witnessed.

Consider the order of things on that one hill. First it was a landmark of the crossing — the height above the landing at Kanam, in the traditions of the settlement. Then it was a name the newcomers' clerks misheard, and the mishearing became a town, and the town became a county capital. The hill has watched all three ages without moving. Sacred geography is often like this: the places outlast every use men make of them, and they keep the oldest meaning

longest — but only for those who are told it. A hill cannot hand down its own story. That, again, is work for elders, and for the chairman learning from them.

Kit Mikayi — The Dala in Stone



Kit Mikayi — "the stone of the first wife" — a homestead standing in granite. Photo: Valerius Tygart via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Kit Mikayi stands about 29 kilometers west of Kisumu, in Seme, Kisumu County — outside Homa Bay County, but inside the same Luo world, and the people of the region have always treated it as theirs. It is a granite tor; its height is given variously as about 40 meters for the main stack and up to 120 meters for the formation as a whole. In Dholuo, **Kit Mikayi means "the stone of the first wife."**

> **The People's Story**
>
> The legend tells of an elder named **Ngeso** who loved the rock so much that he spent his days inside its caves, and his wife had to carry his breakfast and his lunch to him there. When people asked where he was, she answered that he had gone to his first wife — his Mikayi — and the rock took the name.

Look at the formation the way the people read it, and the legend explains itself: the rock is a dala in stone. The bulky central rock is **Mikayi**, the first wife. **Nyachira**, the second wife, stands on one side; **Reru**, the third wife, on the other; **Ngeso** the husband is in the middle; and a smaller rock in front is the simba, the firstborn son's house — the exact layout of the homestead this book describes in Part Two, standing in granite. The site is sacred to the Luo-Kakello clan of the area, a place of sacrifice and prayer in trouble since before Christianity came. Seme women perform the **Otenga** ceremony there on marriage. Legio Maria followers pilgrimage to it, to pray and fast for weeks at a time.

And Kit Mikayi carries a distinction no other site in this chapter has: on **11 December 2019**, UNESCO inscribed the rituals and practices associated with Kit Mikayi on its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding — the strongest official recognition any Luo sacred site has received. Let that stand as the model of what documented heritage status looks like: a site whose stories were recorded, whose practices were named, and whose claim on the world's respect rests on paper that anyone can check. It is the standard this book aims at for Homa Bay's own places.

Burial Hills and Clan Lands

Luo identity was written into land. The clan territories — the pinje — carried the ancestors' names, and burial tied a family to its ground: a man was buried in his own dala, by the gate he had built, and the graves of fathers and grandfathers made the land itself a title deed no paper could replace. The customs themselves — the grave's position, the four days kept for a man and the three for a woman, the cattle-driving of tero buru — are treated in full in a later part of this book. The customs of burial themselves belong to a later part of this book. The point here is geographic, and it is sobering. When the HIV epidemic filled those home graveyards within a single generation, and when land subdivision pressed sons to sell ancestral plots, what broke was not only custom. What broke was the map — the physical proof, written in graves, of who a family was and where it belonged.

That is why this chapter ends with a task rather than a tale. Nyangweso's own burial hills, clan boundaries and landing places exist in no published source. They are known — today, still — by the elders who walk them. The land remembers, but it remembers through people, and people must be asked while they can still answer.

So the last word of Part One is a charge to its first reader. Walk the home ground with the oldest people on it. Ask them to name the burial hills, to trace the clan boundaries, to point out the landing places and the sites of the first homesteads —

and write down every name they give, in their words, before the names go with them. No library in Nairobi or Oxford holds those names. They are held, all of them, within a few miles of Nyangweso, by people who can be visited this month. The next telling of this chapter should be able to print Nyangweso's own sacred geography — because its chairman went, and asked, and wrote it down.

Roots to Remember

- Simbi Nyaima, in Karachuonyo itself, is the old way's courthouse on hospitality: the village that refused the stranger is the village that sank.
- Nyamgondho's tale teaches that wealth held by a condition is kept or lost by the tongue — the spoken word carries power.
- Got Huma above Homa Bay town gave the county capital its name, and Kanam beneath it was among the first landing places of the settlement.
- Kit Mikayi is a dala standing in stone, UNESCO-listed since 2019 — the model of what documented heritage status looks like.
- Graves made land a title deed; when graveyards filled and plots were sold, the map itself broke — and Nyangweso's own sacred geography survives only in its elders.

Part Two — The Dala, the Elders, and the Values

Before there were chiefs' offices, courts, or title deeds, there was the dala — the fenced homestead where a Luo family lived, judged, taught, worked, and buried its dead. This part reads that homestead the way its own people read it: house by house, gate by gate, rule by rule. It then follows the authority that grew out of it — the elders and their councils — and the values that held the whole order together, down to the land itself and the century that changed it.

Chapter 6 — The Dala: A Homestead You Could Read Like a Book



A traditional Luo homestead in Nyanza: the husband's, wives' and sons' thatched huts, raised woven granaries (dero) on stilts, and the fenced enclosure on swept red earth. Photo: Susangesare via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

A stranger approaching an old Luo homestead did not need to ask who lived there, who was senior, who had died, or who was expected. The homestead itself told him. The dala was a circle of houses inside a living fence, and every element of it — which gate you entered by, which hut stood where, whose granary stood behind whose house — was a sentence in a language the whole community could read. Dorothy Achieng' Abonyo's study of Luo housing culture, the ethnographic summaries preserved by Yale's Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF), and a Luo customary-law restatement preserved in the Center for Research Libraries together give us that language in working detail. This chapter teaches you to read it.

The Fence and the Gates

The fence was not a wall but a living hedge of euphorbia — ojuok — thickened with thorn brush, planted to keep away, in the Pitt Rivers Museum's words, "enemies, intruders and wild animals." Inside it, as the eHRAF summary puts it, "the houses

are arranged in a highly ordered pattern on the interior." Nothing in the circle was placed by accident.

There were normally two openings. "The circular, euphorbia hedged homestead has two gates," Abonyo writes, "the main entrance which acts as the basic point of reference, and a minor one at the back. All the huts in the home are built around a common courtyard that they open into." The main gate was the rangach; the smaller, private entrance at the back was the rot. The main gate was the homestead's compass point: positions inside were described by their relation to it.

The gates carried law. **In-laws were not permitted to use the back gate.** The back gate was for the household's own private movement; an in-law — a respected person who is both outsider and family — had to be received publicly and honorably, through the front. Even the dead were sorted by the fence. "The main gate is used by all in life but in death the story changes," Abonyo records. "When the man and the wives die outside the home, their bodies are brought in through the main gate since they are 'permanent residents' of this home. The sons and other family members are brought in through a temporary opening made in the fence." A man's rank in the dala was announced one last time by which hole in the hedge his body came through.

The gate law reached beyond one homestead. When a father established his sons' homesteads near his own, the customary-law restatement is exact about their placement: "he places his senior son to the right of his gate and in front of his homestead. The gate of his son's homestead must, by Luo law, face at right angles to his own so that he may not see inside but that he may guard the approaches to the paternal homestead. The homestead of the second son is placed almost in the same position but to the left-hand side of the paternal homestead with its gate pointing towards the homestead of the senior son and away from the father's at an angle of 45 degrees." The son's home was a guard post for the father's — and its gate was deliberately turned so that the father could not peer into his grown son's yard. Defense and privacy were written into the same rule. Just inside the father's gate lay the alap, open ground "left free of cultivation for the cattle to graze," which would fall to the senior son when the homestead was one day divided.

The Dala in Order: A Walk from the Gate

Read the homestead as its builders arranged it, in this order:

- **The fence (ojuok)** — a living euphorbia hedge with thorn brush, pierced by two openings.

- **The main gate (rangach)** — the public entrance and the point of reference for everything inside; in-laws and the bodies of the head and his wives came through here.
- **The back gate (rot)** — the household's private entrance, not for in-laws.
- **The alap** — open grazing ground just inside the gate, kept free of cultivation for the cattle.
- **The simba** — the young men's house, just inside the main gate, where the homestead's first line of defense slept.
- **The sons' huts** — the first son's next to the gate on the right side, the second son's on the left, and so on in order.
- **The cattle kraal (kul)** — at the center of the homestead, where the wealth of the family received maximum security.
- **The head's own hut** — in the middle of the homestead, between the first wife's hut and the cattle kraal; here stood the duol, where the head received male guests.
- **The head's granary** — behind the man's hut, its contents reserved for emergencies.
- **The first wife's hut (mikayi)** — directly opposite the main gate, the largest hut in the home and the only one with a veranda.
- **The other wives' huts** — the second wife's next to the first wife's, to the right; the third wife's to the left; and so on.
- **The granaries (dero)** — one for each wife (the first wife could have more), standing to the right of their owners' huts.
- **The siwindhe** — the hut of the elderly woman, the pim, where the children slept and were taught.
- **The courtyard** — the open ground the huts faced into: the family's main arena for work, sitting, entertaining, and play.
- **The graves** — the adults of the homestead buried within it, each in the place their rank appointed.

The Houses in Order

Placement was genealogy drawn on the ground. Abonyo's account is the clearest: "The main hut (1st wife's) is situated directly opposite the main gate. In a polygamous home, the 2nd wife's hut is then built next to the 1st wife's to the right; the 3rd wife to the left and so on. The sons also have a system whereby the 1st son (ideally 1st wife's 1st son) builds next to the gate on the right side, the 2nd

on the left and so on." Rank was also built into size. "The 1st wife's hut is the largest in the home and the only one with a verandah. The other wives' huts are slightly smaller… The sons' huts are even smaller and are mainly used for sleeping except in cases where the son has married and built a second hut for his wife to cook in." The veranda — the agola of the older museum descriptions — was not a standard feature of every hut; on Abonyo's evidence it belonged to the mikayi alone, a mark of her rank that any visitor could read at a glance.

The head himself "has a separate hut, which is usually in the middle of the homestead between the 1st wife's hut and the cattle kraal" — set, that is, between his senior wife and his wealth, at the center of everything he was answerable for.

One more rule governed the whole plan: the homestead held **two generations only**. "The homestead accommodates huts for two generations and thus grandsons do not build their huts in this compound. When they grow up, it signifies time for their fathers to establish new homes." A crowded dala was not a failure of planning. It was the signal for goyo dala — the founding of a new home, the subject of the next chapter.

Inside the Hut

Within a single hut, space was as rule-bound as the compound. "The sleeping space is on the right, cooking area also on the right just after the sleeping area to keep the hut warm at night, and the sitting area is in the middle around the beer drinking centre point. On the left is the night space for small livestock and at the back the plinth for pot storage." The left-and-right grammar of the whole homestead — wives' huts, sons' huts, burial sides — ran right down into one room.

The earliest detailed observer agrees, and adds the visitor's place. C. W. Hobley, whose ethnological survey drew on fieldwork between 1902 and 1914, recorded that Luo huts "have two fireplaces. No. 1 is used for cooking. No. 2 for sleeping round. Friends who visit the hut always stop at fireplace No. 1." A guest knew where to sit without being told.

Respect was built into the floor plan. "It is taboo for adolescent sons and daughters to go past the door to their mothers' hut," Abonyo writes. "When sons and daughters come to the mother for meals, the food will be given to them at the door. If she is not in, she will leave it in some special space above the door where it can be easily accessed without stepping into the hut." A growing child learned the boundaries of honor with his feet, three times a day, before he ever heard them stated as law.

The Kendo: The Hearth and Its Three Stones

Every hut turned around its fireplace — the kendo. The word is old and firmly attested: the Mill Hill Handbook of the Kavirondo Language of 1920 already gives "Kendo: fireplace," and a modern Dholuo grammar lists kendo as "a fire place (stove)." The classic form, described in a community-compiled survey of Luo cultural practices, was a traditional stove "made of three sizable stones making a triangle and in between the stones there is a small bowl-like hole where fire wood is inserted and then lit. A pot (agulu or ohigla) is put on top of the three stones then cow dung is placed around the three stones to prevent fierce wind blowing and also heat from evaporating." The three-stone triangle is the standard Luo form the elders can confirm; the word and the fireplace itself stand on the strongest sources.

The hearth was a seat of teaching as well as cooking. Around the fire in the duol, boys "sat with their grandfather in his hut (abila) in front of a burning fire to keep them warm," and there "they were taught about their heritage, culture and how to be responsible members of the society." The kendo's sacredness survives in the language itself: a 2025 linguistic study of Dholuo famine nicknames records the satirical hunger-name "Gachagua oloyo e kendo" — "Gachagua has urinated in the hearth" — a joke that only works in a culture where the hearth is the one place that must never be defiled.

The Dero: Each Wife Her Granary — and the Head's Reserve

Popular retelling sometimes imagines one great common granary at the heart of the dala. The documented order was different, and more interesting. Each wife had her own granary — her dero — for the grain of her own house: "Each wife is to have one granary with the exception of the first wife who can have more. These granaries are located to the right of the owners' huts." A wife's dero was her house's store, under her hand, and the food security of the homestead rested on these several stores, not on one.

But there was a reserve. "Behind the man's hut is his granary whose contents are to be used during emergencies." The wuon dala — the owner of the homestead — kept a store behind his own hut that was not for daily eating: the homestead's famine insurance, under the head's hand, held back for the bad season when the wives' working stores ran low. This head's reserve, not a common store, is the documented institution closest to the popular picture — one man's held-back grain standing between the whole house and hunger.

And the generations were bound into the system: "The sons and their wives do not build granaries in this homestead and instead contribute and gain from the

mothers' granaries." A married son still living in his father's dala ate from his mother's dero — and owed his labor to it. The granary taught what the councils enforced: no one in the homestead ate from a store he had not helped to fill.

The Kul, the Courtyard, and the Guest's Place

At the center of the circle stood the kul, the cattle kraal — placed there, Abonyo notes, "due to the importance given to cattle… where it receives maximum security." Cattle were wealth, bridewealth, compensation, and sacrifice in one; the plan of the dala is, among other things, a security plan for them. Around the kraal, "the courtyard is the family's main arena accommodating several activities such as working, sitting, entertaining, playing etc." — the open stage on which the homestead's public life was lived.

A male guest's place was the duol: the eHRAF summary notes that the husband, the wuon dala, "often has a small independent house (duol) for entertaining other male guests." Inside a hut he entered, Hobley's rule put the visitor at the cooking fireplace. And the guest who arrived at mealtime was fed from the household's own pot — the poet Asenath Odaga preserved the standard in a proverb: the way you receive visitors determines whether they will come back. Hospitality was not decoration on the dala; as the next chapter shows, a new homestead's very first animal was kept for guests.

The Three Teaching Houses

The dala was a school with three classrooms. The first was the siwindhe, the hut of an elderly woman — the pim. Ruth Jane Prince and Paul Wenzel Geissler, writing in the Anthropology & Education Quarterly in 2001, describe her precisely: "Pim could be a grandmother in the extended family, or a childless woman, or indeed any woman beyond reproductive age belonging to the grandparental generation. In this hut, children over the age of seven or eight slept. Boys stayed in the siwindhe until puberty, when [they moved to the simba]." Note the sequence, because it is often mistold: the siwindhe slept children of both sexes from about seven or eight; the girls remained its pupils longest, and the boys graduated at puberty to the second classroom, the simba, the young men's house set just inside the main gate — where the homestead's first line of defense slept nearest the threat.

The third classroom was the duol, the head's fire, where grown men and growing boys sat with the grandfather. The scholar A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo, himself a son of the Southern Luo, framed the three houses as one curriculum and gave the whole system a name: **normative education** — "Duol-education" for owners of

homesteads, "Siwindhe-education" for girls, and "Simba-education" mainly for boys — in which "rules of respect of elders, rules that teach: do not kill, or tell lies and so forth" were taught as the whole community's shared responsibility. The dala did not merely house the next generation. On a timetable as regular as any school's, it manufactured them.

Building a Hut: Men's Work and Women's Work

Even construction was communal and ordered. "The construction of a hut is a communal activity," Abonyo writes. "The men excavate soil and mix it with water for the wall while women and children fetch water. The men also go out to cut required timber, dig up holes for the timber wall structure, fix both wall and roof structure and finally thatch roof. The women's main role is to fill in wattle with mud mix and… plaster it. Plastering the floor is also the women's responsibility. Seasonal roof maintenance is carried out by men as it is taboo for women to climb up the roof." A hut rose the way everything in the old order rose: many hands, each sex and generation with its appointed part.

The Dead Inside the Dala

The homestead did not end at the fence of the living. "Adults are buried within the homestead," the eHRAF summary records, "while infants and those who have died in some spiritually dangerous liminal state may be buried outside the settlement. It is imperative that even those Luo who live in distant cities be brought back to their homestead for burial out of their own house." The famous burial dispute over the Nairobi lawyer S. M. Otieno in 1986–87 — his widow resisting the clan's claim to bury him at home — is the modern illustration of how binding that rule remained: the whole nation watched a court argue over what every dala already knew.

Position still spoke at the grave. The head was buried before, or to the right of, the mikayi's house; a wife to the left of hers; a son by his simba. A named Homa Bay elder, James Guya of Katolo, put the head's place in 2025 as "the middle of his compound, head facing the gate. This was significant in notifying any visitor that the head of the family had died," and noted that women were buried on the left side of the house. And death was advertised on the roofs: "When the man of the home dies, the roof apex pieces in all the wives' huts are removed to symbolise his demise. A visitor walking into the home should recognise the absence of the man of the home without asking. When the widows are remarried ('inherited'), new apex pieces are fixed to symbolise the presence of a 'new' man." The homestead announced its bereavement in its skyline.

Why bury at home? Three documented strands converge. First, the ancestors remain members of the family: "The ancestors are a strong force in the life of the living," and a grave inside the dala kept the dead within the family's daily life. Second, the grave anchors identity and claim: Parker Shipton's Mortgaging the Ancestors (2009), the standard study of Luo land and attachment, shows grave placement "securing the position of the living in a kin group… as well as warranting their enduring claim to territory and membership" — human relations, as one Luo succession study puts it, "extended in land through graves and old homes, through placentas that were buried near houses and through intervention of the dead in people's lives." The dead were, in the most literal sense, the title deeds. Third, burial place was the final proof of a man's standing: "after a man gets out of his father's home and builds his own home, he would never spend the night in his father's home, not even after death," as Nyandiko Ongadi of the Luo Council of Elders stated it in 2025. You were buried where you had become a head.

When a Dala Dies: The Gunda

The dala itself had a life cycle. "Each homestead has a three-generation life cycle," the eHRAF summary records. "When the last of the original inhabitants of a homestead has died, the settlement (now called gunda; plural gundni) will be left fallow for a period and then used as farmland by the sons of the former head of the homestead." Abonyo states the rule as a prohibition: "A Luo homestead ideally 'dies' when all the sons have moved to their homes and the parents have aged and died. When the last parent dies, the homestead is not to be inhabited by anyone and is instead used as a farm after all the structures have collapsed." A dead homestead was not casually reoccupied by later generations.

And a homestead that emptied out of turn demanded an explanation. The missionary-scholar Jim Harries records a Luo bishop preaching on Lamentations in Dholuo, moving from the text's picture of a homestead left empty to his congregation's own category: "gimomiyo dala dong' gunda" — "there must be a reason for the homestead to have remained deserted" — because in Luo reasoning "nothing can happen without a reason." A dala emptied before its time was read as a sign: of witchcraft, of a curse, of chira — the consequence that Chapter 10 takes up. The older landscape remembered the defended ancestors of these same settlements: the large earthwork enclosures called gunda bur and the stone ohinga of the more warlike centuries, some dating to the nineteenth century and earlier.

Roots to Remember

- The dala was a book: gate, hut, granary, and grave each announced a person's place.
- Each wife kept her own dero; behind the head's hut stood his reserve granary for emergencies.
- Siwindhe, simba, and duol were the three classrooms of "normative education."
- The dead were buried inside the homestead — the graves were the family's title deeds.
- A homestead that died became a gunda, left fallow and farmed, never casually reoccupied.

Chapter 7 — Goyo Dala: Founding a Home

Every head of a homestead began as a son in his father's dala. The step from son to head — goyo dala, the founding of a home — was the great threshold of a Luo man's life, and like everything in the old order it was governed: who might found, when, where, and by whose pointing finger. The records preserve the sequence in unusual detail, including two forms of the site-testing rite. This chapter prints them as the records give them — side by side, not blended — because which form Nyangweso used is a question its elders can still answer.

Who Must Found, and When

The obligation fell on the married man: "Traditionally, a married couple with a son must establish a home (goyo dala). They must have a son because he would one day build his house in their homestead, whereas a daughter would eventually move in with her husband." Founding was not a preference or an ambition; it was a duty owed to the next generation, and delay carried penalties that landed on the children. "His daughters cannot get married when he is still in the father's homestead," Abonyo records. "The sons are also not to build their huts and marry in the grandfathers' home." A man who lingered in his father's compound blocked his own children's marriages — the two-generation rule of the dala enforced itself through the marriage market.

Seniority governed the queue. Sons founded in birth order, the eldest first, and the spacing was fixed: two brothers "could not build their homes at the same time or within the same season, a gap of two planting seasons (years) or more" had to be observed between foundings. The order of the dala was thus reproduced, son by son and season by season, across the landscape — each new homestead a guard post beside the old (Chapter 6), each founder in his turn.

The Father Points: Approval

No founder chose his own ground. The customary-law restatement is blunt: no man, by Luo custom, builds his own homestead in the sense of choosing the site and laying the foundation for himself — the father sites the son's homestead. The father's pointing-out of the spot was the approval; there was no separate permit, no committee, no fee. Authority over founding stayed where authority over everything in the dala stayed: with the senior generation, exercised in person, on the land.

The People's Story

Modern Luo retellings add a figure the older texts do not name: a senior relative — typically a paternal uncle, a brother of the founder's father, a man who already possessed an established gate of his own — enlisted to act as overseer and sponsor of the founding. The detail is widely repeated in today's community accounts and fits the order the old texts describe, but this book's researchers found it in modern community media rather than in the ethnographies. It is printed here as the people's story, for Nyangweso's elders to confirm, correct, or set aside.

Testing the Site: Two Ways the Records Preserve

Before any building, the chosen site was tested — and tested in secret, kept hidden beforehand "to avoid juju being planted on the spot by ill-minded people." The test was not about soil or slope. It was about unseen danger. The records preserve two forms of it.

The first form: the cockerel. "A day before the goyo dala occasion, the father of the son to build the home points to the son the spot where to build the home and the son then has to fell a plant on that spot with one blow using a machete. Tradition dictates that one blow must sever the plant and then a cockerel is placed on that spot usually covered with a cone-shaped basket. The bird is left there overnight and if it survives attack by wild animals, and is found alive in the morning the site is proved secure and appropriate for construction."

The second form: the three unhatched eggs. "The man's father would identify where his son was to build a home and tie grass together on that spot. Then, they would place three chicken eggs that had failed to hatch on that spot… it was believed some people would try to do witchcraft in that place [to] ensure the establishment of the home would not be successful… The three eggs were therefore meant to ward off such witchcraft attempts and it was believed that if anyone made such attempts, their efforts would fail to materialize in the same way the eggs failed to hatch. After three days, it was time to build the home."

The two forms are not the same rite wearing two costumes. One tests the site against the dangers of the bush — a living bird staked overnight against wild animals. The other defends the site against the dangers of men — witchcraft answered by a symbol of failure, eggs that came to nothing set against plots meant to come to nothing. Both share the deep logic: a homestead was founded against real opposition, seen and unseen, and no man built until the ground itself had

given its answer. Which form was used in Nyangweso, the elders of Nyangweso must say.

> **The People's Story**
>
> A Luo writer's essay on the old homesteads remembers the small symbols that attended the first day of construction: "the presence of the thuon geno [cockerel] and the eldest son of the homestead on the first day of homestead construction; of the alur [quail]; of modhno grass; of opea termites... played symbolic roles in the traditional beliefs pertaining to home construction among the Luo." The essay is a single modern source, and the meanings of the quail, the grass, and the termites are not spelled out in it — another page for the elders' own telling.

The Morning Procession and the First Chicken

On the day itself, the founding party walked out of the father's homestead in order: "Early in the morning, the family would set off from the man's father's home. The man would walk in front, with his son behind him carrying a chicken, and his wife last carrying food. The man must have an axe, a chicken, and a machete. The chicken was to keep in the new homestead so the family can entertain visitors with a meal." A variant account gives the eldest son the axe to carry — "a symbol of authority" — with the party "guided by his father and other elders" out of the father's main gate. Either way, mark what the new home's first animal was for: not the family's pot, but the guest's. Hospitality was built into the homestead from its first morning, before its first wall.

Built in a Day, Sealed in a Night

Construction had a ritual seal, recorded in a University of Zimbabwe study of Luo sex-related customs: "when constructing a home or a house, construction must begin and be completed on the same day, and that husband and wife must 'sleep' on that very night... It is the element of 'sex' that gives the woman cultural ownership of the house. The homestead belongs to the man but the house is the wife's." The same study records the linked prohibition: a younger wife might not sleep in the first wife's house before the first wife herself had slept there — an early appearance of kwer, the boundary-law of Chapter 10, guarding the order of the wives from the founding night onward.

A second account tells the founding nights differently: "the father and the son... sleep in the new home for a few nights and later a chicken would be slaughtered."

The two accounts may describe different nights of a multi-day founding, or forms kept in different places. The honest course — and the course of this book — is to print both and fuse neither.

> **The People's Story**
>
> Modern community retellings describe the founder's first exit and re-entry through his own new gate, driving livestock, as the act that claims the land — his first wife following with a basket or a water pot, and then communal food sharing to seal the day. Another retelling, circulating in community video, names a rule called Nyono ne dala: a younger son whose turn to found had not yet come could not use his father's gate to leave, but slipped out through a temporary opening in the fence, uncelebrated. Both are told today; neither was found in the older written record. The elders can say whether Nyangweso knew them.

A Head from That Day Forward

Founding was irreversible, and its marks were permanent. The new homestead's gate stood at right angles to the father's gate (Chapter 6). The founder never again slept in his father's house — not in life, and not in death: he would be buried in the ground he had founded, before his own mikayi's house. And the system reached back for those it had nearly missed: a son who died before he could found might be given a simba or a house built in haste, so that he could be buried as a householder and not as a boy. Goyo dala was not real estate. It was the making of a man into an ancestor-in-waiting — the act by which a son became the kind of person a homestead, a council seat, and a grave could belong to.

Roots to Remember

- A married man with a son had to found his own home; delay blocked his children's marriages.
- No man chose his own site — the father pointed out the ground, and that pointing was the approval.
- The site was tested in secret, by the cockerel overnight or by the three unhatched eggs — the records preserve both.
- The new home's first chicken was kept for guests: hospitality came before the walls.
- From founding day, a man never slept in his father's house again — and was buried where he had founded.

Chapter 8 — The Elders: Jodongo, Councils, and Judgment

The Luo were famous among their neighbors for a thing they did not have: a king. Ethnographers call their order a "segmentary lineage system" with a "strongly egalitarian ethos," and note that "in no area was there a centralized authority uniting all Luo." Yet no one who lived under the old order would have called it leaderless. Authority existed at every level — layered, local, and earned — and its carriers were the elders: the jodongo (singular jaduong'). This chapter climbs the ladder of their councils, from the grandfather at his fire to the ruoth and his council of state, and then tells what happened when a foreign government replaced consent with appointment.

How an Elder's Authority Was Earned

At the base of the system, the jaduong' was simply the senior man of a dala or lineage segment — the wuon dala grown old, the grandfather at the duol fire. Every council above him was built of such men. But seniority alone did not make a leader. "Becoming an influential leader," the eHRAF summary states, "required the building of prestige and moral authority. The most immediate criteria for prestige and moral authority were genealogical position and the strength of the lineage" — birth opened the door; achievement walked through it. Community summaries of the same tradition name the achieved side: standing won through commerce, wealth, war, or eloquence; and even the ruoth's office, hereditary in the eldest son in some areas, was "largely meritocratic."

Above all, rule ran by consent. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga — a son of a chiefly house, and later the first holder of the modern title Ker — wrote the principle from inside: "Our Luo system of government was by consent and after consultation between the elders. The clan head did not inherit his position but, once he became the leader of his clan, was held in great respect." And consent had to be spoken into being: "oratory is one of the most admired and highly developed arts in Luo culture; it includes not only stories and proverbs but also formal praise speeches and political persuasion." An elder's authority was performed nightly at the duol and tested in council. A man who could not speak could not rule.

The Ladder of Councils

The sources agree on the architecture of the old government, level by level:

- **The homestead.** The jaduong', the wuon dala himself, with the senior wives in domestic matters: family discipline, the allocation of gardens, the daily order of the dala.
- **The lineage.** The buch dhoot — the heads of the homesteads of one dhoot (clan or lineage segment), "settling domestic issues, allocation of land."
- **The village cluster (gweng').** The doho: the jodong gweng' (village elders) sitting with the ogaye, the peace-maker, and enforced by the ogulmama. This was the first instance for nearly everything.
- **The nation (oganda).** The ruoth with his buch piny, the council of state: the jodong dhoot (clan elders), the ogaye (peace-maker), and the osumba mirwayi (war leader) — deciding famine, rain, war, tribal sacrifice and prayer, and peace treaties, and sitting as the final court of appeal.

Two clarifications belong with the ladder. The first concerns the doho. "All cases first came before the doho, the ruoth's court," the political-structure accounts record. "Here issues of robbery, homicide, witchcraft, land, arson, adultery etc. were heard." The gweng' sub-chief who presided was appointed by the ruoth, and "the ogulmama (police) who saw to it that decisions made by the doho were followed" gave the court its teeth. Ocholla-Ayayo likewise calls the Doho the court "headed by Ruoth and Jodong-Gweng" — the name traveled with the function, at the village level and at the ruoth's own court alike. Note, too, the division of labor the sources insist on: the ogaye made peace; the ogulmama enforced decisions. The peacemaker and the police were never the same office.

The second clarification concerns libamba (plural libembni). It names a lineage segment — a party in the system, not a bench in it. Ocholla-Ayayo's marriage study records that "disputes between lineages libamba and clans (dhoot) were very often related to cattle or the division of cows' meat (pogo lemo)." The libamba were the people who quarreled and were judged — and behind every judgment stood the system's constitutional safety valve: "In cases of serious intraclan conflict, one side might break off and join another clan or form its own lineage." Fission — voting with your feet — checked every council, which is why founding and migration run all through Luo history.

The Ruoth: First Among Elders

The ruoth of an oganda — one of some twelve or thirteen Luo "nations" — was "its jural-political leader. In some ogendini, he was also a prophet." The eHRAF

summary adds a caution this book keeps: before colonial rule, ruoth "most likely meant something closer to simply 'leader'," and "the degree of centralized authority exercised by the ruoth varied significantly from region to region." He was a first among elders — the head of a council, the voice of a decision he had not made alone — not a king with a treasury and a standing army.

When Appointment Replaced Consent

Colonial rule broke the ladder at its joint. The scholarly history of the period is blunt: "in 1908, colonial chiefs were created" in the districts of southwestern Kenya — men inserted into a long-existing patron-client system but answerable upward, to the administration, and no longer downward, to the elders. The Paro Manene oral-history project of the Pitt Rivers Museum records how it looked on the ground: appointed chiefs "began to replace the traditional chief or ruoth," were made to "wear colonial uniforms and helmets, much like the District Commissioners," and kept the ogulmama for a time as their local police — the old enforcement arm in a foreign uniform. The Luo language itself named the whole transformation: mano jananga, "the cultural change resulting from colonial contact." The imposition was felt in its most literal form when the administration treated the Luhya Nabongo Mumia as paramount over all Nyanza, and "the Uyoma chiefs rose up in protest against their subordination to Mumia," as Odinga records.

Homa Bay's own succession, preserved in oral history collected in South Nyanza in 1976–78, shows the pattern name by name. Kasipul, in the old order, was ruled by chiefs titled **Ogai** (singular Ogal): the remembered line runs Sangoro of Konyango, then Sindala, then Oyugi Wuon Bala, "in whose reign the Europeans arrived." The first African ruler under the Europeans, Auma Ogalo, "only lasted one month in the chief's office before being ousted"; the District Commissioner then appointed Omiti. After him came Owili, Omiti's clerk; Obewa; Magak Odeka, under whom "stability and progress were attained"; then Aseda Mola, "ruthless," a few months; then Solomon Owango, under whom Kasipul was split into West, East, and Central locations. Magak also ruled Kabondo "tyrannically" until its people petitioned the District Commissioner and had Odada Wuon Abonyo appointed in his place. The lesson is the contrast: under the old order a bad ruoth was checked by his council and by fission; under the new one, removing him required a petition to a foreign officer — or revolt, and South Kavirondo men of Karachuonyo and Kabondo were among the Luo who turned to the anti-colonial Mumbo movement in 1914.

Cattle: The Currency of Justice



A small herd of zebu cattle grazing under trees at a Nyanza homestead — cattle were the homestead's wealth, its bridewealth, and the currency of its justice. Photo: Veeaj via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

The courts ran on cattle. "Cattle were the compensation for the loss of life and limb," Ocholla-Ayayo writes, and the Doho court "often used to hear cases involving [cattle]." Indeed, so cattle-shaped was the docket that disputes arose "very often related to cattle or the division of cows' meat (pogo lemo)" — even the butchering of a cow was a legal event, because every share was a right, and a wrong share was a case. Justice, like wealth and marriage, was measured in the herd that grazed in the kul at the dala's center. What the published sources do not preserve is a fixed Luo tariff — so many head for such an offense. That measure lived in the memory of the courts themselves, and recovering it is work for Nyangweso's elders, whose grandfathers sat in those courts.

The Sanctions Behind the Court

A council had no prison. What it had was stronger. Behind every judgment stood ostracism — and behind ostracism, chira. The eHRAF summary of social control states it plainly: "belief in witchcraft and chira are powerful means of social control. In this strongly egalitarian society, ostentatious accumulation of wealth and deviation from obligation to share can result in an individual being the focus of jealousy and attention from witches and resulting in sickness and death." A

judgment defied was not merely contempt of court; it was a step toward supernatural ruin. Colonial rule layered its own "native courts" over the doho, and Luo litigants used them shrewdly — a 2025 study of a 1945 inheritance fight shows a Luo man directing his money to his sons through wills and letters while chiefs and elders contested the meaning of custom in the new courts, an early sign of money entering inheritance beside cattle and land.

Oaths and the Power of the Spoken Word

The elder's mouth was itself an instrument of law. The dictionary gives the oath as kuong'ruok, also mbira (Odaga, English–Dholuo Dictionary, 1997), and Dholuo Bible usage preserves the paired powers that hung on a parent's speech: gweth mar wuoro, "the father's blessing," against kuong'ruok mar min, "the mother's curse." Nor is the elders' curse a museum piece: in 2025, after the death in police custody of the teacher Albert Ojwang', elders performed a curse ritual that was reported across Kenyan media, and the Ker publicly threatened curses against disruptive politicians in the same season. The spoken word of the elders still carries the weight it carried at the doho.

The Ker: An Office of 1947

One modern office must be dated honestly, because it is often mistaken for an ancient kingship. The pan-Luo Ker — the figurehead of all the Luo — is not an old institution. The title was coined by Oginga Odinga when the Luo Union was formed in 1947, and the Luo Council of Elders that bears it today crowned its ninth Ker, Odungi Randa, on December 22, 2023. The office is honorable and it is modern: younger than the grandfathers of men now living. A people secure in its roots does not need to borrow antiquity.

The Dani: Women Who Kept the Law

The formal councils were male — even the land committees of the 1970s adjudication were "solely comprised of men." But the sources are equally clear that the dala's moral law was largely taught and policed by women. The pim of the siwindhe was the children's first judge and professor: in Prince and Geissler's case study, a healer grandmother formed her grandson's "social sense, respect, and compassion" alongside his practical knowledge — moral formation is named in the ethnography itself as the grandmother's work. Women, a study of colonial-era Luo social history concludes, "were in control of the domestic economy": the granaries, the food, the brewing for the work parties were theirs, and the mikayi headed the family in the wuon dala's absence. In Homa Bay itself, a University of Nairobi

doctoral study of women farmers of Kanyada and Kabuoch documents grandmothers and mothers as the holders and transmitters of indigenous food knowledge — seed, soil, season — across the generations: the living archive of the dala's subsistence law. And the pim, past the community's sexual restrictions, were the principal tellers of sigendini, the evening stories; Odaga's insult measures a person's formation by that school — Iming' ka mane ok oninde siwindhe: "as ignorant as one who never slept in the siwindhe."

The counterweight belongs in the book too. A widow's security ran through men, by the levirate; women "generally do not inherit wealth"; and a widow who refused the levirate "would bring chira on herself." The grandmothers kept the law. The law did not always keep them. Honest teaching holds both halves.

Roots to Remember

- The Luo had no kings: authority was layered, local, and earned — birth opened the door, achievement walked through it.
- Government ran by consent and consultation; oratory was the supreme political art.
- The doho heard nearly everything first; the buch piny decided famine, rain, war, and peace — and the ogaye made peace while the ogulmama enforced.
- In 1908 colonial appointment replaced consent, and a bad chief could then be removed only by petition or revolt.
- The dani kept the moral law the councils enforced — and the law did not always keep them.

Chapter 9 — Konyir and Mutual Aid: How the Work Got Done



Neighbors raising the timber frame of a traditional house together — the work party in today's clothes. Photo: Woodwayne via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Ask how the old order cleared a field too big for one family, raised a house in a day, or buried its dead with dignity, and the answer is never a wage. It is a party of neighbors. Luo mutual aid was not a single custom but a family of distinct institutions, each with its own name, rules, and rhythm — and the ethnographers documented that family richly. This chapter teaches the family as the records give it. It also keeps faith with a name every Kenyan schoolchild knows — konyir — by telling the truth about what the written record does and does not say.

Saga: The Sponsored Work Party

The best-documented of the institutions is **saga**, the sponsored work party: one household facing a task too large for its own hands calls in kin and neighbors, and pays them in the only currency the institution used — food and beer. "The workers were not coerced and were usually paid with food and/or beer. The Luo in Western Kenya called it saga," writes the historian Opolot Okia in his study of labor in colonial Kenya. Odinga used the same word for the whole cooperative farming

order: "Under the system of Luo land tenure and saga farming, individual land ownership was not entrenched, and co-operation was a spirit in which the people were deeply steeped." A University of Nairobi thesis on Luo communal labor, citing Michael Whisson (1964) and Tom Mboya (1965), records "communal labour exchange locally known as 'saga'" that "could involve other people outside the family… neighbours and friends from far places" — and preserves Mboya's summary of the ethos underneath it: "the Luo liked helping one another."

Rika and Nyoluoro: The Rotation

Beside the one-time party stood the standing circle. Parker Shipton's synthesis describes "Luo reciprocal labour exchange groups (rika) work the land of each member in rotation, performing large, arduous tasks such as weeding." Where saga is one host calling many hands once, rika is a circle taking turns.

The rotation in its fuller form is **nyoluoro**, described by Kenyan community-economics writers: the members "are mostly neighbours from the same village"; "leaders are selected at a sit-down"; rules govern the cycle; and the group works each member's farm or home in turn — "ploughing, building houses, fetching water and firewood, cleaning the compound and farming" — "until every member is visited." The host whose place is being worked "would prepare a meal to appreciate the group," often as a shared potluck. And the whole system "operates under faith — you have to trust the group will come to your place": to be taken first in the queue is an honor, and an honor that obliges.

Two younger relations complete the family. **Shirika** is the monetized form — groups that "hire themselves out to work for cash (often church-based groups)" — the bridge from beer-and-food reciprocity toward the modern chama. And **bar-wabar**, "we divide," is Shipton's term for the wider Luo sharing practices that made dividing food, work, and risk a reflex rather than a transaction.

And What of Konyir?

Konyir is the name Kenyan curriculum materials give to the Luo work party, setting it in a national row beside the Kikuyu ngwatio, the Kamba mwethia, and the Luhya obwasio; scholarship on harambee describes the obligation it names as a reciprocal duty "woven into social life," where opting out was genuinely antisocial. That is what the printed record says — and it is nearly all the printed record says. The operational ethnography — how the party was called, fed, and repaid — was written down under saga and rika, not under konyir. Whether konyir and saga are two names for one institution, regional variants of it, or a general word and a specific one, the published sources do not settle. So this book teaches

the two honestly and separately: saga in full, because the record is full; konyir as the name the nation's classrooms carry, whose exact local form — its summons, its food, its sanctions, the last time it was held — Nyangweso's elders are asked to confirm. What this book will not do is stitch the two names into one invented institution and call the seam a tradition.

How a Work Party Ran

The call. A man — or a widow, or an elder — facing a task too big for one household called kin and neighbors. Attendance was voluntary in form and obligatory in fact: Okia's verdict is "not binding… not coerced," and the sanction was not force but reputation and the return obligation.

The work. The party worked as a body, and the day carried a festive, competitive edge: Shipton calls saga "mildly competitive in nature and festive occasions with food and drink." A study of Dholuo work language shows the party in the vocabulary itself: in saga contexts the work-word timotich keeps company with teko (strength), ler (agility), pek (bodily effort), and nyiewo (to push against resistance). Work was performed and judged like sport — and a man's strength at the party was part of his name.

The host's obligation. Food and beer were the payment, and they were not garnish. The host's wives brewed and cooked — the women's labor stood behind every "men's" institution — and a stingy host fed badly at his peril, because the same mouths that ate, judged. The beer was refreshment and honor, not wages: the comparative East African record is explicit that beer at work parties is drunk during rest breaks and that "there is no concept of paying people." The feast is the relationship. (How much a Luo host owed, in measures, the sources do not say — another entry for the elders' questions.)

Reciprocity. In rika and nyoluoro the rule is arithmetic: every member's turn comes, and the circle ends only when all have been served. In saga the rule is memory: the host owes his own attendance at the others' parties. Underneath both sits the sanction of Chapter 8 — in a society where "deviation from obligation to share" drew jealousy and witchcraft suspicion, the man who ate at every party and appeared at none marked himself at a price no shilling could pay.

Burying Together: Funeral Help, Old and New

The oldest layer of funeral welfare was obligation in kind, not cash: grave-digging, carrying, and feeding fell to kin and neighbors, and the affinal duties were elaborate — Wakana Shiino's study of Kanyamwa, here in Homa Bay, documents the in-laws' feeding obligations at Luo funerals, the yaodhoot and tedo and the

final budho meal. The cash layer grew from the same root in the towns: the Luo Union and its welfare associations charged members dues and paid out for funerals and school fees. The book tells it as one long arc: the village fed the mourners; the city association insured them; the modern funeral harambee — whose scale Luo scholars themselves debate — appeals to the same duty in a new currency.

From Saga to the Union to Harambee

The Union carried the village institution to town. Founded in the early 1920s — 1922 is the usual dating; its welfare-incorporated form came in 1944/45 — under the motto **Riwruok e teko**, "unity is strength," it pooled wages for burials, school fees, and welfare exactly as rika pooled labor for farms. Jomo Kenyatta's harambee of 1963 then nationalized the same architecture for the whole republic. Odinga's testimony closes the loop from the land side: under saga farming and the old tenure, "the very dispersal of plots worked by one family was deliberate and a form of equality… the cardinal principle of Luo land ownership is that land was transferable for use in the community." Mutual aid was not a Luo hobby. It was the operating system — of labor in this chapter, of land in Chapter 11, and of justice in Chapter 8 alike.

The Decline: When the Shilling Replaced the Beer

The sources date the weakening plainly. Rotation groups are "said to have declined with monetization" (Shipton). Colonial "communal labor" corrupted the voluntary principle by coercion, bending a free institution into a forced one (Okia). And the labor merry-go-round was progressively replaced by the shilling merry-go-round — the chama, the cash circle of today. The form survived by changing its currency. What thinned was not the instinct — "the Luo liked helping one another" — but the feast at the center of it: the day when work, food, judgment, and fellowship were a single event, and a man's name was made in other men's fields.

Roots to Remember

- Saga was the documented work party: one host, many hands, payment in food and beer — never wages.
- Rika and nyoluoro were the rotation: the circle worked every member's place in turn, on faith.
- Konyir is the name the classrooms carry; its exact local form is the elders' to confirm — the record keeps the names separate.
- The feast was the relationship: the mouths that ate were the mouths that judged.
- The Luo Union and harambee are saga grown to town and nation — Riwruok e teko, unity is strength.

Chapter 10 — The Values: Kwer, Chira, and the Named Virtues

Every order described in this part — the gates, the granaries, the councils, the work parties — rested on a moral architecture that the Luo themselves named and taught. Its architect in print is A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo, whose Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo (Uppsala, 1976) was written from this book's own region. Two keystones hold the arch: a boundary and a consequence.

Kwer: The Boundary

"Kwer defines all moral acts and obligations" in Luo society, Ocholla-Ayayo writes. Kwer names what is forbidden: the incest bars; the ritual prohibitions, like the rule that a younger wife must not sleep first in the mikayi's house (Chapter 7); the rules of respect that governed gates and doors (Chapter 6). The order of things matters here. A deed was not wrong because it was punished; it was punished because it was kwer. The boundary existed before the breach, known to every child who had slept in the siwindhe, and it did not need a policeman to be real — because behind it stood the second keystone.

Chira: The Consequence

Breaking the rules brought chira: in Ocholla-Ayayo's definition, "misfortune befalling a person or his/her family as a result of behaving contrary to the ancestors' wishes, or to the prescribed rules of social behaviour" — consequences that "may inflict suffering and/or cause the extinction of the whole society." Chira was no respecter of persons: men were as likely as women to commit the acts that brought it. And its threat policed everything this part has described — the widow-inheritance refusals of Chapter 11, the stinginess of Chapter 9, the judgments of Chapter 8. A society without prisons ran its deepest enforcement through the conscience and the ancestors at once.

The Body Kept the Accounts

Around the keystones sits a vocabulary of virtue that linguists can verify word by word. Lucia N. Omondi's study of Dholuo emotional language records that Ocholla-Ayayo treated these concepts as "central to the ethic of virtue": **hera** (love), **ng'uono** (kindness, generosity), **ichkuar** (meanness — literally "red stomach"), and **wichkuot** (shame — literally "head-swelling"). The body itself kept the moral accounts: meanness was a stomach gone red, shame a head swollen out of shape. A child learning the language was learning the ethics in the same lesson.

Unity — Riwruok

Odaga's dictionary gives "unity (n) riwruok, winjruok" — the word stands verified at the dictionary level, apart from the Luo Union motto Riwruok e teko that carried it across the twentieth century. And the order of history matters: unity was practiced long before it was sloganized — in the rika rotation, in the saga party, in the peace treaties of the buch piny. The motto did not invent the virtue; it inherited it.

Respect — Luor

Odaga: "respect (vt) luoro, miyo luor" — to respect is literally to give luor. The value was choreographed into daily life: seniority, the eHRAF summary notes, was "naturalized through temporal construction sequences and daily rituals" — who built first, who harvested first, who ate the best cut of a slaughtered animal first, who entered by which gate, who was fed at his mother's door rather than past it. A child learned luor with his feet before he learned it with his tongue. Respect in the old order was not a feeling politely expressed; it was a sequence correctly performed, hundreds of times, until it became character.

Truth — Adiera

Odaga gives "truth (n) adiera." The virtue was load-bearing. A court system that ran on testimony — councils without written records, judging robbery, homicide, and land on the spoken word — stood or fell by it; and the teaching system stated it as a command in the children's syllabus: "do not kill, or tell lies." In a world where the oath and the curse were real instruments (Chapter 8), a lie was not a small social lubricant. It was a crack in the only archive the people had: each other's word.

Generosity — Ng'uono and Mwolo

Odaga's own introduction glosses ng'uono as "kindness… mercy," and mwolo likewise as kindness; Omondi's linguistics confirms ng'uono as kindness and generosity together. Its opposite had a name and a diagnosis: ichkuar, the red-stomached meanness that made a man the focus of jealousy and witchcraft suspicion. Understand generosity in the dala economy correctly: it was not charity dispensed from surplus. It was insurance (the giver of today is the beggar of next season), reputation (the feast was judged by the mouths that ate it), and law (the obligation to share stood behind the courts) — all at once.

Shame and Honor — Wich Kuot

Wich kuot — shame, "head-swelling" — was the social emotion that guarded the virtues. A modern Dholuo dictionary preserves the proverb-shaped warning: "sunga mang'eny nyalo kelo wich kuot" — "too much pride (sunga) can bring shame." Shame attached to poverty's signs as much as to crime: Paul Mboya's classic Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi records that it was the height of embarrassment — wich-kuot — for a Luo to be reduced to eating sweet potatoes and porridge, the foods of the poor. Honor, by contrast, had no single separate noun in the sources this book's researchers could check: it was carried by luor, the respect others give you; by duong', greatness and seniority — the root inside jaduong', elder; and by a clean name spoken well at the duol. Honor was not a thing a man held. It was a thing other people's mouths held for him.

Hospitality: The Stranger at the Fire

The guest — wendo, a basic word in every beginner's grammar — met a system built to receive him. Hobley's visitor sat at the cooking fireplace without being told (Chapter 6). The founder's first chicken was kept expressly "so the family can entertain visitors with a meal" (Chapter 7). And Odaga's proverb set the standard as strategy and courtesy in one: the way you receive visitors determines whether they will come back. The stranger fed today was tomorrow's witness in a dispute, tomorrow's in-law, tomorrow's ally in a dry year. Hospitality was the foreign policy of a people without embassies.

Care for Widows and Orphans

The widow was kept inside the lineage by lako, the levirate: kept on her husband's land, her children kept in his name (Chapter 11 gives the system's whole logic). The orphan was absorbed, not institutionalized — the dala order had no orphanage because the lineage itself was the orphanage, and a child of the blood did not become a stranger by a parent's death. The honest shadow stands beside both, as Chapter 8 recorded: the same system denied women inheritance in their own right and believed chira followed the widow who refused the levirate. Care and constraint grew on the same stem, and this book teaches them together or not at all.

How the Children Learned

Four documented channels carried the values into the next generation. First, the **three teaching houses** — siwindhe, duol, simba — Ocholla-Ayayo's "normative education," with its stated syllabus of respect for elders, do not kill, do not lie.

Second, **proverbs** (ngeche), deployed in context at the moment of fault or decision — including the standing rebuke that measured a person's ignorance by absence from the grandmother's school. Third, **work alongside elders**: herding, the grandmother's farm teaching documented among the women of Kanyada and Kabuoch, and the saga party where strength and generosity were publicly graded before the whole neighborhood. Fourth, **apprenticeship in the body**: Prince and Geissler's healer grandmother raising her grandson into knowledge and "social sense, respect, and compassion" in a single formation. Values were not a subject in the old school. They were the timetable.

Roots to Remember

- Kwer was the boundary — a deed was punished because it was kwer, not kwer because it was punished.
- Chira was the consequence: misfortune believed to follow the breaking of the ancestors' rules, falling on men and women alike.
- The body kept the accounts: ichkuar, the red stomach of meanness; wich kuot, the swollen head of shame.
- Luor — respect — was a sequence performed with the feet: who built, harvested, ate, and entered first.
- The stranger fed today was tomorrow's witness, in-law, or ally: hospitality was foreign policy.

Chapter 11 — Land: Tenure, Inheritance, and What Registration Changed

Everything in this part finally rests on the ground itself. The old Luo did not hold land the way a modern registry holds it — as a thing a person owns — but as a web of relationships a person belongs to. This chapter sets out that customary order, the inheritance rules that divided the dala's fields, the levirate that bound land and widowhood into one system, and then the arrival, in living memory, of surveyors and title deeds in South Nyanza — and what that arrival did to the rights of patrons, clients, and women.

Land Was a Relationship

Land was held and allocated inside the lineage, under the weg lowo — "traditional land patrons" who "would often give temporary land rights to clients (jodak)," in Parker Shipton's summary of the tenure research. Two statuses mattered: the lineage "owner," the ja lowo or weg lowo, and the jodak, the stranger-client farming by grant. And rights over a single field were layered, not lumped: "one person might hold a right to hoe it, another to swap it, and a third to transfer it."

Odinga, who grew up inside the system, gives its principles: plots were allocated "so that there should be equal sharing of the land near and far from the river, equal allocation of plots suitable for different crops… the very dispersal of plots worked by one family was deliberate and a form of equality." Newcomers were "accommodated and allocated land to farm." And "the cardinal principle of Luo land ownership is that land was transferable for use in the community" — use could move from hand to hand; the land itself was not a commodity. Boundaries were living markers — sisal, konga, planted along them, on the evidence of a Luo succession study — and the deepest claims were anchored in the ground by the dead themselves: graves and buried placentas, the title deeds of Chapter 6.

While the Father Lived

Division began long before death. "While the father lives, a son's right to a portion of the land is inalienable," the customary-law restatement rules — a son's claim on the homestead land could not be signed away under him. The father assigned gardens to the wives' houses, and kept a special portion of his own: the **mondo**. A study of South Nyanza oral history explains it: the mondo was the head's reserved garden — its first maize went to the ancestors, and "a small piece of the mondo is given to each son so that he should share in the blessings of his father." Even the father's private field was, in part, a distribution waiting to happen.

Inheritance: Seniority Made Visible

At the father's death, the ideology of seniority divided the land the way it had divided everything else. Ocholla-Ayayo: "When the time of the inheritance comes the ideology of seniority is respected: the elder son receives the largest share, followed in the order of seniority. If it is the land to be divided… the senior son gets the middle piece, the second the land to the right hand side of the homestead, and the third son takes the land on the left hand side. After the father's death the senior son takes over the responsibilities of leadership" — and shows his rank in sequence: "first in harvesting, first in cultivation, first in eating the best parts of a slaughtered animal, first to own a fishing boat," and leadership of the Jokakwaro, the people of one grandfather, in sacrifices.

The customary-law restatement's homestead division matches and extends it. With two sons of one mother, "the senior takes the central portion of the homestead land up to and beyond the gate (Rangach) and includes the Alap… The second son takes the remainder." Further sons were settled on elder brothers' land, building their simba in a brother's village before marriage. And the youngest's portion was of a different kind: "**The youngest son invariably remains in the father's village to care for him in his old age and his inheritance is the Mondo of the father and remaining gardens of his mother.**" The last-born stayed — and the dala itself, with the father's own garden, was his pay. Inheritance here was not only division of wealth; it was the wage of care, assigned in advance.

The friction lines are documented too. "Land cases usually arise between parties in the Nyieko relationship" — sons of co-wives, whose mothers' rivalry (nyieko, the jealousy between co-wives' houses) descended into their sons' boundaries. Sons born outside marriage (kimirwa) were disadvantaged, expected — on a single study's evidence — to seek land from their biological fathers or accept a small portion from maternal grandparents. And the system's hard edge: daughters did not inherit land, and "women generally do not inherit wealth," property passing toward the husband's brothers.

The Levirate and the Land Were One System

Land and widow-inheritance cannot be taught apart, because they were not lived apart. The widow kept farming her dead husband's fields because the levir — a brother or close kinsman of the husband — stood in the husband's place, and the children, including any born afterward, remained the dead man's children in his name and on his land. To refuse the levirate was to step outside the lineage's land as well as its protection, and chira was believed to follow the refusal. Teach the logic whole, as this book has tried to do: the levirate pressed hard on some

widows, and it was also — in a world without pensions, insurance, or title deeds in women's names — the mechanism that kept a widow on her fields and her children in their father's name. Both statements are documented. Both are true.

When Land Went to Court

Land cases went first to the doho — land stands named in its docket — with appeal to the buch piny. Boundaries were proved by the elders' memory of plantings, graves, and former gundni: the landscape itself was the archive, and the old men were its readers. When judgment failed, the standing remedy was fission — the losing side founded a new dala elsewhere, as Chapter 8 described. The adjudication era would introduce a failure mode the old system had no antibody for: sellers who "sold the same piece of land to several people, using different elders as witnesses." The elders-as-title-deeds system, honest for centuries, could be gamed the moment land carried a cash price.

Registration Comes to South Nyanza

The national frame came first. The Swynnerton Plan of 1954 launched consolidation, adjudication, and individual registration across Kenya — and in the Luo areas the policy met a tenure system it did not understand. Odinga, who watched the consolidation teams work, records that they "ignored the traditional and highly complex system," and that the people feared "that if they had no direct claim to a particular shamba… they would have nowhere to live." His counter-proposal — register the clan as a whole, keeping the layered rights inside one title — was not taken.

South Nyanza's own record, from the Land Tenure Center's evaluation of the studies by Coldham and Okoth-Ogendo, is specific: in the Luo-dominated South Nyanza District — today's Homa Bay County — "adjudication and registration (without consolidation) were undertaken in the late 1960s, and by 1973, registration had been completed" in the areas studied. A Kasipul-focused study gives the local program a slightly later face — adjudication beginning in the 1970s under the Land Adjudication Act of 1968, family land registered under at most five names, officers advising against registering fragments separately. The two datings are compatible — a district-wide program rolled out section by section from the late 1960s into the 1970s — and this book prints them together rather than choosing between them. The evaluators' warning stands over the whole episode: the process itself manufactured insecurity, as "better-informed and powerful individuals have taken advantage of the adjudication and registration process."

Three consequences followed, all documented. **Women lost ground on paper.** "Women were marginalized in the whole land adjudication process. The land committees and subsequent discussions were solely comprised of men since land is the sole purview of males in Luo society." Achola Pala Okeya's classic study, from fieldwork in 1974–75, traced the same reform's effects on Luo women's farming and land rights: registration froze into individual male names a system in which women's use-rights — to gardens, to the dero's produce, to the mondo's sharing — had been real but unregistered. **The patron and the client collided.** Titling forced one name onto layered rights, and the process was "inclined to give the titles to the jodak" — the client actually farming the field — "fostering bitter conflict" with the weg lowo patrons whose grant he had farmed under. **And paper met its limit:** banks found foreclosure on Luo land nearly impossible "because the defaulter's kin would surround the land." Paper title and moral title have coexisted uneasily in Homa Bay ever since.

One earlier intervention belongs on this chapter's timeline: the **Lambwe Valley Settlement Scheme (1954–75)** — a colonial scheme here in South Nyanza, in today's Homa Bay County, which resettled families onto cleared land as part of tsetse-fly control, documented in the medical-historical literature from the Homa Bay district files. Before the surveyors of adjudication, the valley had already taught its people that governments could move families across the map. The ground the old order read like a book had acquired new authors — and the elders who could still read the first edition became, in a single generation, the only copies left.

Roots to Remember

- Land was transferable for use, never a commodity: the weg lowo granted, the jodak farmed, and rights over one field were layered.
- The mondo was the father's reserved garden — its first maize for the ancestors, a piece of it for every son.
- Inheritance ran by seniority — the senior son the middle piece — and the youngest son's portion was the wage of care: the mondo itself.
- The levirate and the land were one system: it kept the widow on her fields and her children in their father's name.
- Registration in South Nyanza (late 1960s into the 1970s) wrote one male name over layered rights — and women's unregistered rights lost ground on paper.

Part Three — Ceremonies and Seasons

The old Luo year was not counted in dates but lived in seasons, and a Luo life was not measured in birthdays but in rites, each one arriving in its proper order. This part follows both rounds: the year of the fields — sowing, harvest, rain, and hunger — and the life of a person, from the first shaving of a newborn to the last remembrance feast of the dead.

Chapter 12 — The Old Calendar: A Year Read from the Sky

The first thing to understand about the old calendar is that it was not a calendar of dates at all. There was no printed chart, no numbered month, no New Year's Day. The year was a round of seasons, recognized by the rain, the stars, the birds, the insects, and the state of the crops. Scholars of Luo time reckoning have stressed that Luo temporal categories name the salient moments of ecological and communal life rather than fixed units: the Luo "did not employ a linear and sequential calendar in which a predetermined number of days constituted a month," and the periods their language names are not the months of the European calendar, even when modern writers line them up side by side.

The four seasons

For the Jo-Kano of the Kano Plains — Luo country just northeast of Homa Bay, sharing the same lake-basin weather — a University of Nairobi thesis records the year divided by activity into seasons:

- **Chwiri** (also chiri) — the long rains: the planting and weeding season, roughly February to July.
- **Keyo** — the harvest period, around August.
- **Opon** — the short rains and the second planting season, roughly September to October; around Yala the short-rains season runs about September to December.
- **Oro** — the dry season.

Archdeacon W. E. Owen, whose 1933 paper "Food Production and Kindred Matters Amongst the Luo" is the earliest extended eyewitness account of Luo farming used in this book, gives the same rhythm from the farmer's side: two sowings in a normal year — the main one in February and March with the long rains, for the slower-growing crops, and one in the shorter rains about September and October, for quicker crops; weeding from about April; and January "reckoned to be the driest month of the year," the season of rest from farm work.

Notice, too, an honest detail the thesis preserves: informants disagreed even then about whether there was one planting season or two — chwiri primary, opon secondary. The old calendar was always local and argued over, never a printed chart. That is worth remembering before anyone teaches it as a fixed system. It was a way of reading the world, and readings could differ from hill to hill.

Reading the time to sow: the Yugini stars

Because there were no month-names in general use in Owen's day, the time to sow was read from the sky. The constellations Orion and the Pleiades were known together as **Yugini** — the three stars of Orion's belt called chuo, "the men," and the Pleiades cluster mon, "the women." When, shortly after nightfall, these stars stood about midway between zenith and horizon, sowing time had arrived. **No one might sow before the stars reached their position, however good the early rains looked.** And if the millet had not flowered by the time the stars dipped below the horizon after nightfall, a poor harvest and scarcity were expected.

The birds gave the same signal at ground level. A bird Owen names Ondiek ti oyieng — "the wild beasts are well fed," the brain-fever bird — had a three-note cry to which the Luo put words: **"Dak tu kom" — "Aren't you going to sow today?"** Another bird, Oliech ga apol, follows behind the digger eating the turned-up insects; its presence said sowing time was at hand. And in the autumn sowing, some withheld their seed until the kites arrived in thousands to feed on swarming flying ants.

Names for the turning year

A modern scholarly compilation of Luo month designations — presented by its own author as representative rather than definitive, with local variation — lines the ecological year up against the calendar most people use today. January is Dwe Magungu, named for the marabou stork, whose appearance signaled coming rain. February is Dwe Agoro, for the winged termites emerging — a seasonal delicacy. March is Oruka, the transitional month. April is Dwe Onyoso, for the Carebara ants. May is Dwe Ohia, the finger-millet harvest and its foods. June and July are Dwe Yugni, the cold season — Yugni is also the name of a small star cluster seen at dawn. September and October are Dwe Opon, the short rains and renewed planting. November is Dwe Olemo, fruit ripening and abundance. No widely recognized indigenous designation was recorded for August or December.

These names are a gift for teaching — but teach them honestly. They come from a modern compilation, and names varied by locality. Before they are taught in Nyangweso as "ours," the elders of Nyangweso should be asked which of them the old people here actually used.

The day itself was divided the same way, by the sun and by work: kogwen, daybreak, "when the cock crows"; okinyi, morning; odiechieng', midday, the sun overhead; odhiambo, afternoon — the word that also names children born then; and otieno, night. A child's name could therefore carry the calendar inside it, as Chapter 18 will show.

The hunger season and its rules

Hunger had a name — **kech** — used both for famine and for the ordinary seasonal shortage that came every year. A 2025 study based on fieldwork in Homa Bay County itself found that hunger bites hardest **between April and July**, when the crops are still being weeded and the harvest of August has not yet come in. The same study documents a characteristically Luo response to that suffering: the community **gives famines nicknames**, drawn from the circumstances and the bodily experience of the hunger, as a way of braving and remembering them. Twelve such nicknames were collected from Homa Bay informants. The individual names could not be recovered from the published text — they wait to be recorded from the elders who still carry them.

How did the old system carry people through kech? Not by any central famine organization — Owen is blunt that "there was no tribal organization of food supplies as a provision against famine." It carried them by layered reserves, each layer held close to home:

- **The per-wife dero**, the granary, was the first line. Owen adds its internal structure: alongside the family's common fields, individual members held their own plots, **mondo**. The head of the family's mondo grain went into a separate store as a reserve "in case of the main store being depleted"; grown sons and daughters could hold mondo too, and in necessity their grain went into the family store.
- **The woman's protected reserve.** Grain still in store when the new crop came in was at the wife's disposal. She commonly bartered it for a cow or heifer — the custom is **rundo**, and the beast, called **dher tekre**, was **her own property**, which her husband could not bequeath away from her. "In case of famine she could take of its offspring and barter it for grain" — and she kept the beast for her children. This is a documented, teachable fact about women's economic rights inside the old system, and it deserves its place in any honest account of it.
- **Seed was begged, not hoarded against neighbors.** If a planting died for lack of rain, "seed was then begged from neighbours more fortunate." And a wife's first care after harvest was to secure next year's seed — hung in the head from the hut roof or stored in pots, and regularly sunned on the flat thigo tray.
- **Wild foods were the deep reserve.** A nutritional-anthropology study of the Luo of Bondo District identified **72 different edible vegetables, most of them growing wild**, gathered mainly by women. Many are eaten rarely in good times — "except for the lean days when no alternatives are available."

- **In true famine, people moved and bartered.** The responses were kisuma — journeying away from home in search of food; bartering livestock to those who had grain; and, in the hardest cases, famine marriages.

And beneath all of it, discipline held the system together: "Except in time of famine, stealing from the crop is unknown" within the community, Owen records. The granary system worked because the community's rules worked. A people who cannot trust each other's granaries cannot survive a hunger season together — the old Luo knew this, and built accordingly.

Roots to Remember

- The old year had no dates: it was read from rain, stars, birds, and crops.
- Chwiri, keyo, opon, oro — long rains, harvest, short rains, dry season.
- No one sowed before the Yugini stars stood in their place.
- Hunger — kech — bit hardest between April and July, and famines were given nicknames to be braved and remembered.
- The wife's rundo cow was her own property — her family's famine insurance, protected by custom.

Chapter 13 — Golo Kodhi: No One Sows Before His Senior

If one ceremony teaches the whole old order, it is **golo kodhi**, the first sowing. It is documented in unusual depth because researchers from Wageningen University — Nelson Mango, Paul Hebinck, and Hellen Kimanthi — studied exactly why Luo farmers in Siaya, a day's walk from Homa Bay and the same culture, still keep local seed and still observe this rite. Their accounts, built on Mango's 2002 fieldwork, are the backbone of this chapter, with Owen's 1933 eyewitness record alongside.

The order of sowing

The rites were once performed at village level, then repeated downward. "During the planting time in the past, the most senior person (Jagol Pur) in the village would sow first, and at this time only seeds of food crops such as sorghum and millet were used for this ritual." The rite was then "repeated at homestead and household levels following a certain order, the order of seniority… within a lineage or jokakwero," the first wife of the grandfather sowing first within her sphere.

Owen, writing a generation earlier and further south, describes the same rule from the homestead side: "When the time was ripe for sowing, the Mikayi or chief wife of the head of the community was always the first to sow. None dare begin their sowing until the mikayi had thus given permission. Any who were so bold as to begin before the mikayi were made to feel the displeasure of the community" — and Owen records a man disciplined for sowing too soon within living memory of his writing. The two accounts frame the first sower at different scales — the village senior in one, the community head's mikayi in the other. Both are given here as found; which form Nyangweso knew is a question for its elders.

Within the homestead, the mikayi sowed before the other wives. Within a family of brothers, the eldest son sowed before his younger brothers — who literally could not put seed in the soil before him. A farmer interviewed by Hebinck and Mango explained it in his own words: "I am the eldest son in my father's family and failure to do so might impede the progress of my other brothers in farming… Once my remaining Uncle Odongo and my mother have planted, then I can also plant, followed by my two younger brothers."

Because the order ran from the most senior downward, **the last person to plant might wait days, if not weeks**, to sow. Seniority was not ceremony for its own

sake: the order was the calendar, staggered by rank. Every man's sowing day was fixed not by a date but by his place.

The seed, and the night before

The rite required **family seed — koth dala** — seed kept in the family across generations, not bought seed. A farmer's explanation, recorded word for word, is the theology of the rite in a single paragraph:

"Family seeds are the ones that were passed on to us by our ancestors. They are the ones that we try to regenerate and in case of any calamity, we can use them to offer sacrifices to the ancestors. They are able to recognise them. Furthermore the first harvest comes from these seeds we use to brew beer from and that we offer back again to our ancestors during the ceremony known as fuachra [fwachira]."

This is also why hybrid seed cannot serve the rite: it is a "strange seed," it does not become family seed, and it is, in the researchers' phrase, "incompatible with Luo cultural repertoires."

The human side of the rite, from Kimanthi's summary of the older practice: the husband spent the night with the mikayi before sowing day; she sowed the following day, and he spent the four nights after sowing in her hut. **If the husband was dead, the widow performed the rite with a cock and a hen**: she threw seed to the hen, made sure the hen ate and mated with the cock, and then planted. The rite bound the fertility of field, marriage, and household into a single act — teach it plainly and without embarrassment; that is what it meant.

Seed was also guarded by taboo. Owen records that a menstruating woman must not sow seed, and that in a polygamous household lesser wives dared not approach the mikayi to share the labor at such a time, "such contact with the seed would prejudice the crop"; a woman in that state could likewise harm a crop by walking through it. A modern seed-studies essay adds the positive side of the same logic: seed was associated with purity, its keeping was the work of the senior, elderly wife, and "the eldest wife, known as mikayi, was the one who handled seeds on behalf of the homestead and was the first one to sow seeds… She was also the first one to harvest."

Blessing, protection, and the exceptional sacrifice

The meaning of the rite, in the researchers' summary: it "was and is still believed to fertilize the seed and get blessings from the ancestors so as to guarantee a good harvest."

Ordinary field preparation had **no** invocation: Owen is explicit that soil preparation "was performed without any ceremony of invocation preceding it, **except when the land had been taken in conquest from enemies**" — then the jabilo performed a **misango** sacrifice to neutralize harmful magic left in the soil. And a cultivator who suspected an enemy had buried harmful medicine (yath) in a field would not begin until a diviner had been consulted.

In exceptional danger, a greater sacrifice preceded sowing: **bilo**. If the Jaduong' bilo, the senior jabilo, was warned in a dream of disaster threatening the season's food, he called the elders together; bilo was performed early in the morning, before the cattle went out to graze, "to avert any disaster threatening the community." Owen gives dated instances: the jabilo of Sakwa performed bilo in 1931 during a boundary dispute with Asembo, and again in early 1933 against the locusts.

Crop protection continued through the season: bundles of herbs (migalo magalo pe) tied atop a pole six to eight feet high in mid-field against hail; and the pest medicine **yadh miri** (also yadh lisese), sprinkled as a decoction over the crop at evening. Its preparation required a medicine man "of peaceable disposition… not a quarreller"; it could not be supplied to an adulterer; and its power depended on the whole community being at peace until harvest. Few passages better show the old logic: the crop's safety and the community's morals were one system.

What happened if a junior jumped the order

The sanctions were real, and they were believed to be deadly. Owen records community discipline of a man who sowed too soon. The Wageningen gender study of the same rites in the Sauri area records the belief attached to a junior wife who ignored golo kodhi and dwoko cham: she "grows thin until she dies, unless a diviner (a traditional healer/practitioner) treats chira using manyasi, a herbal [remedy]." Chira — the wasting that follows breaking the rules, the chike — is treated fully in Chapter 21. Here it is enough to see the mechanism: the sowing order was enforced by community discipline in this world and by chira in the unseen one.

What survives

Golo kodhi is weakened but not dead. Mango and Hebinck conclude that first sowing and first harvesting, "based on seniority… **even today remain important elements that shape agriculture**, despite commoditisation, labour migration and the increasing influence of churches." Farmers keep a plot of local varieties specifically so the rites can be performed — in one documented case the husband

grew hybrid for the market in both seasons while "his wife grew local varieties mainly for subsistence use and to fulfill the cultural purpose of golo kodhi and dwoko cham."

Roots to Remember

- Golo kodhi: the most senior sowed first, and the order ran downward by rank — the order was the calendar.
- The rite required family seed, koth dala, kept across generations; bought hybrid seed cannot serve it.
- A widow could perform the rite with a cock and a hen, so no household was left outside the order.
- Jumping the order brought community discipline — and the fear of chira.
- The rite still lives: families keep local-seed plots today precisely so it can be performed.

Chapter 14 — Dwoko Cham: The First-Harvest Feast

The year's second great rite answered the first. If golo kodhi sent the seed out in order, **dwoko cham** — "bringing the food back home" — brought the first harvest in, in the same order, and turned it into a feast before anyone ate freely.

The rite, step by step

From the documented practice, as summarized by Kimanthi after Mango's fieldwork and corroborated in outline by a study of food culture in Kisumu:

1. "During harvesting time, dwoko cham (bringing the first harvest back home) ritual is also performed. **In the past, the most senior wife in the village was to harvest first.**"
2. "**She would brew a local beer, busaa, under instructions from her husband and invite the village elders and co-wives to a feast that was known as fwachira.**"
3. "This was offered to please the ancestors and God for the good harvest, and **was done by pouring some of the alcohol on the ground**."
4. "**The elders ate the first harvests during the ceremony before anyone else.**"
5. "The rest of the farmers would then harvest their crops **in order of seniority** and perform fwachira with their neighbours."

The Kisumu food-culture study carries the same rule into the family: "the first harvest must be eaten by the most elderly and senior member of each family for others to follow."

Notice the theology inside the order of events. The first portion of the harvest went **downward** — to the ancestors and God, in beer poured on the ground. Then it went **upward** in rank, to the elders. Only then did it go outward, to everyone else. Gratitude and seniority were enacted before appetite. And the beer itself had to come from the family-seed crop of Chapter 13 — the ancestors were offered what they could recognize.

The work of harvest

Harvest labor had its own order. For millet, reaping was the men's duty — "a laborious business, calling for judgment, for not all the heads would be ripe" — while women and children packed the grain into baskets and carried it to the dero. Some millet roots were left to spring again for a second crop. And "it used to be

the custom for a present of a small basket of grain to be given to the Jabilo or medicine man, after harvest" — a first-fruits gift to the spiritual guardian of the community, already dying out in Owen's time.

What survives today

Dwoko cham survives in reduced form: household-level rather than village-wide, kept by some families and dropped by others, under pressure from churches, hybrid seed, and labor migration. But the first-fruits impulse itself — that the first of the crop is not eaten casually but presented, with thanks, in company — is the piece that can most credibly be revived, because its logic is an ethic any generation can recognize: gratitude before appetite, and the elders honored first. Whether Nyangweso ever held fwachira village-wide, and what words were said over the poured beer, are questions only its elders can answer.

Roots to Remember

- Dwoko cham brought the first harvest home in the same seniority order that sent the seed out.
- The senior wife harvested first and brewed the busaa for the fwachira feast.
- The first portion went to the ancestors and God, poured on the ground; then the elders ate; then everyone.
- The beer had to be brewed from family seed — the ancestors were offered what they could recognize.
- The feast survives in reduced, household form — its ethic of gratitude before appetite is its living core.

Chapter 15 — Rain and Drought: Prayer at the Shrines

A correction to make, and make proudly

Popular writing often speaks of Luo "rain-makers," as if rain-making were a standing office of the old system. The earliest extended eyewitness source says the opposite, and this book teaches it Owen's way. Owen wrote in 1933:

"Contrary to what many would expect, amongst people who periodically suffer from lack of rain, **the Luo have developed no system of rain makers.**"

At the top of Usenge Hill in Kadimo, he records, "there is still to be seen a site marked by a collection of votive pots, where the local elders gathered to offer sacrifice and supplicate the local spirit, together with the clan spirits, in times of great drought, but this is entirely different from the rain-making cult." Owen adds the inland Luo's own explanation: away from the uncertain lakeshore, "they simply say that they never have lack of rain, so why should they have rainmakers."

The Luo did have a word for a rain specialist — **jajimb koth** — but when one was wanted, they **hired a Bantu practitioner**: Owen names the Basiekwe clan of the Banyole, and men of Mudhiero in Marama. Fishermen on the lower Nzoia also called in such specialists when rivers ran low. So the Luo drought response was not a rain-maker's technique. It was **elder-led corporate prayer and sacrifice at clan shrines**, addressed to the local spirit, the clan spirits, and ultimately to Nyasaye. Later summaries that speak loosely of a "rain-maker performing sacrifice for the rain" should be read against Owen: the sacrificer at a Luo drought rite was an elder or a jabilo, whatever title a later writer gives him.

The shrines

Usenge Hill, Kadimo. The votive pots of the elders' drought-sacrifice site, described above. Its guardian spirit was reputed to be a snake so large it could encircle the hill. Owen himself cautions that the rite may have been influenced by neighboring Bantu peoples — the caution is printed here with the fact, as he printed it.

Got Ramogi — Ramogi Hill, in Siaya. The first settlement hill of Ramogi Ajwang', ancestor of the Luo, and the people's archetypal prayer mountain. Its features include the **Rapogi Stone**, by tradition Ramogi's altar for prayer in drought; shrines (hembko) across the hilltop; and a rock below the summit through which Ramogi "is said to speak and ask for sacrifices of alcohol, goats or

hens," where people prayed "when preparing to fight or in times of disease or drought." Sacrifices there are still performed by a direct lineal descendant of Ramogi — most recently recorded during the drought of **2004, "when rain followed the sacrifice."**

Got Alila. Named with Got Ramogi in comparative religion literature as a hill the Luo regard as a place of God's special manifestation — "dwelling places of God when he visits the earth."

Kit Mikayi — "the stone of the first wife" — near Kisumu: a great rock outcrop held sacred, "a special place for ritual observances," used in drought, illness, and crisis. Even its name carries the mikayi's seniority into the landscape.

Behind all of these stands a general pattern: sacrifices to Nyasaye "were always carried out on top of a hill, under a big tree"; almost every location had its sacred tree, **libaga**, under which sacrifices were conducted, and the offering (liswa) was eaten in the open air beneath it.

> **The People's Story**
>
> The people tell that the Rapogi Stone on Got Ramogi shakes when it is about to rain, and that from the summit Ramogi blessed the lake for fish and the east for harvest. These are the stories the community tells about its founding hill — told here as the people's own story, as it has come down in popular retelling.

The hill in the twentieth century

The Legio Maria church also prays at Got Ramogi: it keeps a shrine there and holds overnight prayer sessions on the hill. And in **1964, Legio members broke the speaking-rock shrine** — a documented act, recorded by the scholar Celia Nyamweru. Tradition holds that the pastor who led the desecration died within 24 hours, struck by lightning; that sequel belongs to the people's telling, not the documented record. Even so, the incident holds the whole twentieth century in miniature: the old shrine, the new church, and a community deciding which power the hill belongs to. Chapter 17 returns to that contest.

Roots to Remember

- The Luo had no rain-maker system — Owen, 1933, says so flatly. Drought prayer was led by the elders.
- When a rain specialist was wanted, one was hired from Bantu neighbors; the word for him was jajimb koth.
- The shrines were hills and great trees: Usenge, Got Ramogi, Got Alila, Kit Mikayi, and every place's libaga tree.
- Sacrifice at Got Ramogi is still performed by a descendant of Ramogi — recorded as recently as the 2004 drought.

Chapter 16 — The Spirit World: Nyasaye and the Juogi

Nyasaye — one God, many names

The Luo were, in the words of a 2024 anthropological study of Luo sacrifice, "practically monotheists": the existence of the Supreme Being, **Nyasaye**, "is taken as a matter of course" — a self-existent creator "responsible for the creation and maintenance of heaven and earth," by whose will everything happens. "For a Luo nothing happens by chance."

His names are His attributes, and they are the finest short theology this book can teach:

- **Jachwech** (also spelled Jachuech) — the Molder, the Creator: "Jachuech gik moko duto," Creator of all things.
- **Nyakalaga** — the Ubiquitous One, "the one who flows everywhere." In the teaching associated with Mboya, Nyasaye "flowed in [the] human body… the molder of human beings," and the name Nyakalaga pictures His life-sustaining force, unseen, felt by rich and poor, good and bad, "like the Sun which does not single out the objects of its warmth but shines impartially on all alike."
- **Were** — "One certain to grant requests."
- **Nyasaye** itself — "He who is begged, pleaded or petitioned."
- **Jarit** — Protector and Helper.
- **Wuon Koth** — Father, or Owner, of Rain, the rain-giver.
- **Ruoth** — King; and as judge, **Ja-Ngad Bura**, the impartial Judge.
- **Wuon Ngima** — Owner of Life; **Nyasaye Mochwere** — the Everlasting; **Nyasaye ma Ratego** — the All-Powerful; **Obong'o** — the One and Only.

Nyasaye dwells in the sky and is closely associated with the sun (chieng') and the moon (dwe) as His manifestations. The sources are careful on this point: the Luo **do not worship the sun itself**; the sun is where His presence is seen. Elders greeted Him at the day's hinges. The 2024 study preserves an old man's sunrise prayer — "Oh! Please, may you rise well, for my body to be calm; let the bad winds blowing not take control over me" — and at sunset: "May you set well for me, that I may receive blessing."

Where the name came from

Gilbert Ogutu's University of Nairobi thesis, An Historical Analysis of the Luo Idea of God c. 1500–1900 (1975), remains the standard scholarly history. Ogutu argues that among the Central Luo the older name of the chiefdom deity was **Jok**; that as the Southern Luo trekked south without chiefdoms, they developed the concept of a Supreme Being who guided the migration, "whom they later called Nyasaye," while **Juok** remained in use "only in reference to spirits, witchcraft and namesakes." His comparative table is worth teaching from directly: for the Southern Luo, the dominant spiritual powers are the **kwere**, the ancestral spirits; the vengeful ghost is chien; sacrifice is dolo or lam; the diviner is ajuoga. The name Nyasaye itself is widely held to be borrowed from neighboring Bantu peoples — a reminder that even the name of God carries the history of the journey.

The juogi and the kwere: the dead who stay near

Below Nyasaye stood the crowded middle world. **Juogi** (singular juok) are spirits in general: ancestral spirits, nature spirits, and the possessing spirits that could seize a person, for good or ill. "Juok is like wind or air whose presence may be heard and appreciated or blamed, but no one knows from where it is coming and going."

The **kwere** are the ancestral spirits of one's own family or clan — the powers actually approached in daily life. A University of Nairobi thesis on divination puts it precisely: communal sacrifice to Nyasaye happened in crises like drought, led by the ruoth or his chosen ajuoga, but "the Luo approach ancestral spirits in everyday life more often than Nyasaye. Ancestral spirits (kwere) belong to a family or group of families. Their action is confined to their respective families. One becomes an ancestor (kwaro) only after death."

And there was **chien** (also jachien) — the ghost of a dead person wronged or improperly buried, which could return in vengeance. Much funeral and naming practice, as later chapters will show, exists to keep the dead from becoming chien.

Possession was a recognized road to spiritual office: spirits such as **Sepe, Mumbo, Wagande,** and **Lang'o** possessed people — often through delirium in illness — and the possessed could become diviners. Owen describes the Sewe (Sepe) cult, whose devotees were mainly women, festooned with beads, shells, and bells, going from homestead to homestead singing and receiving small baskets of grain.

Misango: sacrifice, the grammar of approach

Sacrifice — **misango**, a word Ogutu notes is itself borrowed from the Luyia emisango, where the Luo's own older terms include dolo and lam — was the formal way human beings approached the unseen: an ox (rwath) or ram (yim) slaughtered, portions eaten in the open, portions given to God and the ancestors. Its documented occasions map the whole of life: drought and rain; land taken in war; sickness diagnosed by divination; the averting of disaster, as in the bilo of Chapter 13; death ceremonies; and marriage. Sacrifices to the dead were often made at the grave in the homestead, after the dead person appeared in a dream and indicated what was wanted.

The specialists: jabilo and ajuoga

Two offices must not be confused, and this book keeps them distinct.

The **jabilo** (plural jobilo) was the community's senior ritual expert — "a kind of great priest." He alone conducted **public** sacrifice to Nyasaye; he "can help the community against drought, plague"; no sacrifice or event of significance could occur without consulting him, and "his orders must be heeded." He foretold the outcome of battles and laid down the ritual law of the community. His power was called **bilo** — the same word as the great averting sacrifice of Chapter 13.

The **ajuoga** was the diviner-doctor of family life. He conducted **family** sacrifices to the dead, diagnosed the spiritual cause of sickness and misfortune, found hidden enemies and lost property, advised on every ceremony, and treated chira and possession. His documented instruments were three: divination by pebbles and shells (**goyo gagi**), the divining board (**mbofua**), and the gourd (**ajawu**); a single ajuoga might use more than one. Around these two stood lesser specialists — the ja-kor, prophet and foreseer; the ja-dolo, a hired conductor of sacrifices; and the ja-juogi and ja-yieto, treaters of spirit possession.

Owen, who knew a converted medicine man personally from 1910, records with dry honesty one mundane engine of divination: both parties to a quarrel consulted the same diviner, and a client who paid more than his enemy might be "given away" — the diviner's knowledge of the community was itself a source of his accuracy. Teach the office with respect; and teach this too, for the old system's own people knew its human side.

Roots to Remember

- The Luo were practically monotheists: one God, Nyasaye, whose names are His attributes — Creator, Protector, Owner of Rain, impartial Judge.
- The sun and moon are where His presence is seen; the sun itself is not worshiped.
- The kwere, the family ancestors, were approached in daily life more often than Nyasaye.
- Misango, sacrifice, was the formal grammar of approach — at drought, sickness, war land, marriage, and death.
- The jabilo served the whole community in public sacrifice; the ajuoga served the family in divination and healing. Do not confuse them.

Chapter 17 — When Christianity Met the Old Religion

The first mission in South Nyanza was planted in Homa Bay's own heartland: the Seventh-day Adventists at **Gendia Hill, Karachuonyo, in November 1906**, followed by stations at Wire Hill, Rusinga, Kanyadoto, Karungu, and Kamagambo. Catholic missions worked the region from the north.

The mission churches condemned sacrifice, polygyny, the levirate, and the funeral rites, and demanded that converts abandon them. The friction ran deep and long: the Adventist Encyclopedia's entry "Adventists and Luo Culture" (2021) shows it still running along exactly two seams a century later — **marriage and death** — and names the sanction that kept many Christians half-observant: "there is always a fear that if one fails to comply with cultural practices, misfortunes (called chira) may befall them." A man could sit in church on Sunday and still fear the wasting that follows a broken rule. That double loyalty is the real religious history of the region, and any honest teaching must name it.

Legio Maria: the church that answered in Luo

The largest Luo response to the missions was not rejection of Christianity but its re-founding in African hands. **Legio Maria** — formally, from 1979, the Legio Maria of Africa Church Mission — arose **among the Luo of South Nyanza in 1962–63**, out of the Roman Catholic Legion of Mary movement, which had been established among the Luo in the 1930s.

Its founders were laypeople. **Simeo Ondeto** (about 1910/20–1991) was baptized a Catholic in 1952 and by the late 1950s was a well-known healer and prophet. **Gaudencia Aoko** (born 1943) preached charismatically and baptized thousands. Legio belief holds that on **9 March 1962, at Suna in Migori**, the Holy Spirit revealed that Christ had returned in Ondeto — Baba Simeo Melkio Messias, the Black Messiah.

Ondeto established his headquarters on **Got Kwer** mountain — "the New Jerusalem, the Holy City." The church kept Catholic forms — the rosary, the saints, a hierarchy crowned by its own pope, the first being Timoteo Blasio Atila (1964–1998) — while **accepting polygamists and much traditional practice** that the mission churches barred. Growth was explosive: "within a year, the fledgling church claimed nearly 100,000 members." Scholarly membership estimates run from 20,000 in 1964 to over a million from the 1990s onward. The church was

legally registered in **1966**. Aoko left by about 1965, after Ondeto restricted women's roles, and founded her own church.

> **The People's Story**
>
> Behind Ondeto, Legio's own telling places a forerunner: Mama Maria, remembered as a wandering old woman who had preached through Luo villages in the 1920s and 1930s and was "generally regarded as a crazy person." The church tells her story as the voice that went before the Messiah. It is preserved here as the church's own tradition.

Legio's relation to the old shrines was double, as Chapter 15 showed: it prayed on Got Ramogi, and in 1964 its members broke the old speaking-rock there. It is best taught as a living, changing tradition — Luo Christianity negotiating with Luo religion on Luo terms.

The honest summary

Christianity did not simply erase the old religion. It displaced its public institutions — sacrifice, the jabilo's authority, the funeral sequence — while its deepest categories proved durable: one creator God; the nearness of the dead; chira as the price of broken rules. Every church in Luoland still has to reckon with those categories today. That reckoning, not a simple victory of one side over the other, is the story Edwin's generation has inherited.

> **Roots to Remember**
>
> - The first South Nyanza mission stood at Gendia Hill, Karachuonyo, in 1906 — in Homa Bay's own heartland.
> - The friction between church and custom still runs along two seams: marriage and death — held together by the fear of chira.
> - Legio Maria (1962–63) re-founded Christianity in Luo hands under Ondeto and Aoko, claiming nearly 100,000 members within a year.
> - The old religion's public institutions were displaced; its deepest categories — one God, the near dead, chira — endured.

Chapter 18 — Birth and Childhood: Entering the World in Order

Pregnancy and birth

Pregnancy was guarded by discretion. "People are discouraged from noting when a woman is pregnant, for fear that problems might result from jealous ancestors or neighbors. Older women and midwives assist the woman throughout her pregnancy and in childbirth." Rituals around a birth "began months before the child was born… directed towards the prospective mother."

The documented sequence after birth comes from the National Museums of Kenya's Elimu Asilia heritage series, "Celebrating the Birth of a Baby in Old Luo Culture" — a museum education source, reliable in outline, though the fine detail should be confirmed with Nyangweso's elders, since regional variation is certain:

- **Golo nyathi oko — taking the baby outside.** Mother and baby were secluded until the child was first brought out — **after 4 days for a boy, after 3 days for a girl**. The same four-for-a-man, three-for-a-woman rhythm governs funeral days later in this part of the book — one of the old system's deep patterns.
- **Lielo nyathi — shaving the baby.** The child's first hair — its "birth hair" — was shaved, marking its separation from the world of the womb and its incorporation into this one. The same logic of hair as separation returns at death.
- **Miyo nyathi nying' — naming**, treated below.
- **Neno nyathi — the formal visitation.** The new mother was visited in order: first her own young sisters, sent by her mother with cooked and uncooked food; then friends and village women (ting'o nyathi), bringing gifts. Beads (tigo) were tied around the mother's neck for blessing and around the child's wrist "for protection from the witches."

Naming: a name is a record

Luo names are documents. A name records the time, season, weather, harvest, or circumstance of a birth, the state of the family, or the ancestor who has returned. Boys' names begin with **O-**, girls' with **A-**. The table below gives the sourced examples:

Circumstance of birth	Boy	Girl	Source
Born at night	Otieno	Atieno	Mboya tradition
Born in the morning	Okinyi	Akinyi	Base research record
Born in the evening	Odhiambo	Adhiambo	Base research record
Born in the rainy season	Okoth	Akoth	Base research record; Luo practice summaries
Born at harvest	Okeyo	Akeyo	Base research record
Born in famine	Okech	Akech	Ayodo, Luo (1996)
Born in the dry season	Ooro	Aoro	Ayodo, Luo (1996)
Born in the weeding season	Odoyo	Adoyo	Ayodo, Luo (1996)
Born in prosperous times	Olomo	Alomo	Ayodo, Luo (1996)
Conceived without the mother seeing her periods	Okumu	Akumu	NMK Elimu Asilia
First of twins	Opiyo	Apiyo	Mboya tradition
Second of twins	Odongo	Adongo	Mboya tradition
Child born after twins	Okello	Akello	ATR study, citing Mboya

Above the circumstance name stood the **juogi naming**. Between birth and about age two, an ancestor might appear in a dream to a family member and ask for the child. The child received that ancestor's name and "is supposed to assume some of the mannerisms of the ancestor he or she is named after — if the ancestor was quiet, the child becomes a quiet person; if talkative, the same." Only ancestors who had done good in life were believed to appear so; "children are rarely named after bad people." Naming ceremonies were sometimes performed to determine whether a particular spirit had returned in the child.

Twins

Twins were not an ordinary birth. The Kenyan Luo position, as summarized from Mboya, is plain: "The birth of twins is believed to be the result of evil spirits; it is treated with special attention and requires taboos (prohibitions) on the part of the parents," and Mboya elaborates on the many rituals linked to such births. The detailed twin-ritual sequences available in print come from the Jupadhola of Uganda — Luo cousins, but a different people — and they are **not** transferred into

this book as if they were Kenyan Luo practice. For Nyangweso, the twin customs are an elders' question, with Mboya's Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi as the text to put in front of them.

Childhood: the staged schools

Childhood itself was a curriculum with rooms. There was the **siwindhe**, the grandmother's house, where girls slept and children over ten learned conduct, marriage, and the tales. There was the **duol**, the grandfather's hearth, where boys ate and were instructed. And for boys there was the passage onward to the **simba**, the young men's house. A Maseno University journal article on Luo proverbs gives the hinge between the rooms: boys who had grown enough "would move from Siwindhe to Simba… when the boys had attained **eleven years and had had their six lower teeth extracted**" — the rite of the next chapter.

Play was training too. Children imitated grinding, building, and spear-throwing. The board game **ajua** taught reckoning and chance. Wrestling (**amen**), tug of war (yuayo tol), and boat racing (kwang'o yie) belonged to the post-harvest gatherings of Chapter 22. No one announced that school had begun; the whole homestead was the school, and its teachers were the grandparents.

Roots to Remember

- A baby was brought outside after 4 days if a boy, 3 if a girl — the same rhythm that later governs mourning.
- The birth hair was shaved: separation from the womb's world, entry into this one.
- A Luo name is a record — of the hour, the season, the harvest, the hunger, or the ancestor who returned.
- Twins were a special, guarded case; the printed detail from other peoples is not borrowed here.
- Childhood had rooms for its schools: siwindhe, duol, simba — and grandparents for its teachers.

Chapter 19 — Nak: The Teeth, Not the Knife

The rite

The Luo are one of the peoples of Kenya who **do not traditionally circumcise** — and this book says so plainly and precisely, because the contrast defines them among their neighbors. Their initiation was **nak** (also nego or nago lak): the removal of **six front teeth from the lower jaw**, undergone by **both boys and girls**.

Age. The sources vary honestly, and the book teaches the range rather than a single birthday: roughly 12 to 18 in one account; extraction by about age 11, before a boy's move to the simba, in another; and the Yale eHRAF summary says only "at some point in the pre-adult phase of the life cycle," adding that the practice was common "until the 1970s." Teach the range — about 11 to 18 — and let local elders narrow it for Nyangweso.

The operator and the place. The rite was often performed **at the marketplace by a specialist tooth-cutter**, whose tool "resembled a screwdriver." Cutters might entice candidates with food, grain, or money.

Meaning. Three layers are documented. First, **ordeal**: "braving through the extraction… was seen as a way of separating children from adults" — a public test of courage and endurance that also bonded the cohort and marked one as Luo. Second, **identity**: the gap was a visible ethnic signature, readable across a marketplace. Third, **practical medicine**: if lockjaw — tetanus — struck, medicine and food could be given through the gap. And a child who died before initiation had **one lower tooth removed after death**, so as not to go to the next world unmarked.

The longer initiation. Nak was the bodily seal on a moral initiation that had been running for years in siwindhe, duol, and simba — instruction in marriage, conduct, the spiritual world, land, and cattle. The teeth took an hour; the becoming took a childhood. That is the sentence to teach: the rite was short because the preparation was long.

The circumcision contrast, stated carefully

Luo tradition had no circumcision for either sex. The neighboring peoples among whom a Nyangweso child would have known it practiced were the **Kisii (Abagusii)** to the east and the **Kalenjin** peoples — and, famously, the Kikuyu, whose 1929–30 mission controversy made "circumcision" a national argument in which the Luo stood aside as non-practitioners.

Under mission and school pressure, nak **waned from the 1960s**, though the record shows it still common into the 1970s; older Luo with the gap can still be met today. In recent decades some Luo families have adopted male circumcision for medical reasons, including HIV prevention, or for social reasons. That is a modern borrowing — it is not a revival of anything Luo, and this book labels it so.

Roots to Remember

- Luo initiation was nak — six lower front teeth removed — for boys and girls alike; the Luo did not circumcise.
- It was performed at the marketplace by a specialist cutter, at about 11 to 18 years of age.
- Its meanings were ordeal, identity, and practical medicine against lockjaw.
- The teeth took an hour; the becoming took a childhood of teaching in siwindhe, duol, and simba.
- Nak waned from the 1960s and lingered into the 1970s; the gap can still be seen on elders today.

Chapter 20 — Courtship and Marriage: A Process, Not a Day

A Luo marriage was not a wedding day. It was **a years-long process of named stages that built an alliance between two lineages**, and bridewealth was not a price but the load-bearing structure of that alliance. Ocholla-Ayayo's dictum deserves its place here: among the Nilotic Luo, cattle were "compensation for the loss of life and limb," the medium of sacrifice, prestige, and marriage alike, to the point that "individual life was less important than the question of saving, protecting or acquiring cattle."



Cattle were the circulatory system of marriage — bridewealth moved between lineages on a vast scale. Photo: Veeaj via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

The stages

Evans-Pritchard's Luo Marriage Customs (1950), from 1936 fieldwork at Alego, documents a sequence far richer than any two-stage summary:

1. **Simba courtship** — acquaintance formed around the bachelors' hut, and at dances and visits.
2. **Meko** — the formal "taking" of the bride: the groom's party seized and carried off the bride — by arrangement, with ritual resistance — bringing her to his home.

3. **Diero** — the morning-after stage: a party from the bride's home arrived demanding an ox. Ocholla-Ayayo describes them entering the kraal and pointing to the best bull; customarily they were promised an ox and given another animal, the **Rwadh Dier**, the diero bull, to take home.
4. **Lupo** — the bull-killing ceremony at the bride's family.
5. **Duoko** — the bride's formal return visit to her parents. Three days after the diero visit, the bride's sisters brought her food from her mother, with a slaughtered goat and kuon, eaten with the groom's sisters.
6. **Riso** — the binding ceremony at which the wife became fully married in the domestic and legal sense.
7. **Sepo** — the final ceremony, when the wife began cooking in her own home: a wife in her own right, with her own hearth, granary, and garden.

Ayie and nyombo: the ceremonies modern practice foregrounds

Within and across those stages ran two ceremonies that modern Luo practice has brought to the front.

Ayie — from ayie, "I agree" — is the consent ceremony. In today's practice, at the bride's home, the groom's party formally seeks the parents' consent; the mother is honored and receives her portion (in today's practice, money in an envelope); the bride cooks and feeds the groom before everyone, "to show her acceptance"; the groom is served a whole fried chicken as a new son of the home; and the groom's party may not stay past midnight. A note for honest teaching: in the older record, the payment to the bride's mother sat inside the wider bridewealth sequence and signified her acceptance. Modern practice has made ayie a stand-alone first ceremony. Both are true — dated differently — and the book presents both.

Nyombo (also keny) is the great bridewealth negotiation and delivery at the bride's home, held in broad daylight and well publicized, "to give pride to the parents." The groom's entourage arrived slowly, feigning reluctance; there was a night in the simba of the bride's brother; feasting, with professional singers and dancers; the father inspected the cattle and was empowered to refuse unsatisfactory animals; and the bride followed to her new home after some days. Modern accounts put the interval at a maximum of about five weeks after ayie.

Older than any negotiation: the beer-straw betrothal

Older and more binding than any negotiation was the **betrothal by beer-straw**, which Owen records in detail. Two family heads cementing friendship would feast in a hut; when the beer stage was reached, the host took the long hollow beer-

sucker, drank, and passed it to the other with the invitation to drink if he agreed to a matrimonial alliance. To drink was to contract — "as irrevocable as a contract can be," hedged with magical penalties. A girl so pledged was **nyar oseke**, "the girl of the beer-sucker." Yet even this could be broken: a girl who found a man brave enough could elope with him, after both drank **manyasi** medicine to neutralize the penalties.

Owen also corrects the outsider's picture of the voiceless bride. The girl's mother "is taken into the fullest consultation," and "generally there is some form of consultation with the girl" — because hard experience taught that forcing a girl past a certain point "is only to lay up trouble for the future."

Bridewealth: the named cattle

Bridewealth — **dho keny** — was not a lump sum but a schedule of named animals owed to named people. Evans-Pritchard distinguishes the dho keny proper — cattle earmarked for particular relatives: **the mother's cow, the father's bull, the "bow cow" for the father's brother, the cow of fresh milk, the calf of the knife** — from the **dho i keny**, an additional negotiable number, conventionally five to seven in 1936.

The totals, and their fall, are documented. In the oldest accounts: 40 head, sometimes 50 to 60. By 1936: **15 to 20 head** in most of Central Nyanza. And Ocholla-Ayayo's own observation to 1959 names Homa Bay's own peoples: **Kadem, Karungu, Kanyamkago, Kanyamwa, Karachuonyo and Kanyada paid 16 to 20 head**. A secondary summary of Evans-Pritchard puts the figure at about 12 by 1969.

The cattle moved between lineages on a vast scale. At 20 head per marriage, Ocholla-Ayayo calculated some **40,000 head a year** leaving two exogamous blocs alone. Bridewealth was the circulatory system of the whole cattle economy. Kin helped a young man marry through **riembo dhiang'**, the loaning of cattle, expecting the same help in return. Rules of order governed whose marriage came first: **the senior son of the senior wife married first**; a junior could be advanced only by the cattle-loan device — a father sending a cow to a friend so that the elder-yet-junior son could complete his marriage.

Polygyny: structure and the wife's standing

Wives were ranked — **mikayi** (first), **nyachira** (second), **reru** (third) — and the rank was built into the homestead plan, her granary, and her burial place. Each wife had her own hut, her own dero, her own garden (mondo), and cattle allocated to her house for milking, though the herd belonged to the family. The mikayi's

authority was constitutional, not decorative: she kept the seed, sowed first, harvested first, and her seniority ordered the labor of the whole house. Junior wives accepted present subordination partly in prospect of future authority over daughters-in-law.

Nor was a wife without weapons. Owen documents the **wife's curse**: striking her thigh with her open palm, she could vow never to cohabit again; if the husband forced the issue, "dire penalties, sickness of himself and children, will result" — and he had to come to terms, the reconciliation sealed by drinking manyasi. A wife who left and returned was restored by a sheep sacrifice — "the killing of that sheep substitutes for her own blood." And her rundo cow, from Chapter 12, was her own.

What changed it

Mission teaching — one wife as a condition of full church standing. Colonial and Kenyan marriage law — statutory and Christian marriage regimes standing alongside customary law. Girls' schooling. Wage labor. And the collapse of the cattle totals themselves: a man who cannot raise 16 to 20 head marries later, pays in installments and cash, or elopes first and negotiates after — a sequence any Nyangweso elder can narrate from his own family's last fifty years.

Roots to Remember

- Marriage was a process of named stages — courtship, meko, diero, lupo, duoko, riso, sepo — building an alliance between lineages.
- Ayie, "I agree," is the bride's consent; in its modern form it stands first, but in the older record the mother's acceptance sat inside the bridewealth sequence.
- Bridewealth was named cattle for named people — the mother's cow, the father's bull — not a price.
- Karachuonyo and Kanyada paid 16 to 20 head into the 1950s; kin lent cattle through riembo dhiang' so a young man could marry.
- The mikayi's authority was constitutional: seed, sowing, harvest, and the labor of the house ran by her seniority.

Chapter 21 — Death and Mourning: The Largest Rite of All

No Luo gathering was larger than a funeral, and no sequence longer. The ethnographer Wakana Shiino documented the full order of rituals at Kanyamwa, some twenty kilometers from Homa Bay — fourteen named acts: the announcement; **budho**, the vigil; **kunyo**, the grave-digging; **iko**, the burial; **tero buru matin** and **tero buru maduong'**, the lesser and greater driving-away of the dust; **liedo**, the shaving; **kee**; **yaodhoot**; **tedo**; **tero cholla**; **keyo nyinyo**, the formal division of property; **rapar**, remembrance; and a final budho meal. This chapter gives the human and theological depth around that skeleton — and treats the hard topics, the widow's path, chira, and bad deaths, as they must be treated: factually, respectfully, and without sensation.

The first hours, and ywak

Death was announced by the widow herself. A scholarly study of levirate unions records the sequence: at the announcement of a man's death, "his widow immediately removed her clothes or chieno," and wailed loudly **four times as she ran to the gate and back to the death hut** — the wails announced to the clan that one of their own was no more. She was then "smeared with a mixture of cow dung and ashes." Oginga Odinga's own memoir confirms the picture for 1934: mourners "taking off all their clothes and daubing themselves with ash — the dress of mourning."

The stripping was read two ways by the community: as the sign of total loss — the husband's death "had stripped her of all the care and worth she used to enjoy" — and as testimony. A wife who had been despised would not strip, and everyone would know why.

As mourners poured in, the widow put on **her husband's clothes inside out** — a symbol the same study glosses carefully: temporarily, before any levirate union, "the widow resumed the roles of the husband; she became the sole head of the homestead." Ywak, the wailing, was thus not uncontrolled grief but a formal language: announcement, honor, and protest could all be spoken in it.

The bereaved were in a state: **chola** — "made unclean by handling and touching the dead body," barred from certain duties and highly restricted socially. A person in chola might not even engage in a fight, lest it cause muma, a taboo breach.

Burial, tero buru, and the shavings

Burial followed on the second or third day. After burial, a **Mugogo** — a grandson from a married daughter's home — "was then called to break the sticks at the top of each wife's hut, to signify that the woman is a widow" and that the head of the home was dead.

Tero buru — "sending away the dust" — drove cattle bellowing through the homestead and out toward the old battleground, to chase off the spirit of death and escort the dead man's spirit. The Daily Nation's 2025 account of its fading adds the sensory record: "youths and elders, adorned in animal hides, sisal hats, and tyre sandals known as akala, would drive bulls around the homestead, raising great clouds of dust — buru, the rite's namesake," performed "to ward off the malevolent spirit believed to cause death" and to restore the homestead's spiritual harmony.

Liedo, the shaving, came in stages. On the third or fourth day, each widow gathered with her children **outside the compound, on the road**, where the shaving was performed by a **jagut** — a cleanser who was herself a widow — "to ensure that the mourning or death hair remains outside the compound." The Nation account counts the full rhythm: a first shave marking entry into mourning, a second releasing the children from seclusion, and a third freeing the widow from taboo, preparing her for tero chola. Hair, here as at birth, is the visible stuff of a state: to cut it is to leave one world and enter another.

Mourning itself — budho — "was marked by a deliberate slowness. Mourners would linger, grieving communally." The community did not leave the bereaved alone with it, and the sequence closed only with rapar, remembrance, and the affines' final meal. Property, too, waited for its rite: it was divided formally at keyo nyinyo, not grabbed.

The widow's road: tero chola and tero

The terms must be kept straight, because public argument often muddles them. The widow's state is **chola**; removing it is **golo chola**. **Tero chola** is her journey: she visits her natal home — leaving the chosen inheritor in her house — where a goat is slaughtered and eaten; she brings meat back, eats with the inheritor, and the union is sealed, in the older form by the act called **chodo kode**, "removing the tassel," which ends the mourning period. The inheritor is the **jater**; the institution is **tero** (also lako): a brother or close kinsman of the dead man takes the widow into his guardianship, raises any further children **to the dead man's name**, and keeps her land, house, and lineage place intact.

Why it existed. The book states the original logic as its defenders state it, because it is a welfare logic. In a world without pensions, without title deeds in a widow's name, and without a state safety net, tero guaranteed that a widow was not expelled from the land that fed her; that her children kept their father's name, land, and clan; and that the dead man — who "leaves behind children is not [really] dead," in the Luo saying "Ng'at ma onyuol ok otho" — remained socially alive. A 2015 scholarly study concedes the custom "was initiated with good intentions and had many functional values… it protected and catered for the welfare of the widowed and orphaned members of the Luo community."

Why it is contested. With equal documentary honesty: the same study's major finding is that as practiced, the levirate "is oppressive to the widow; it undermines her freedom of choice," and it recommends the custom continue, if at all, "in a modified, new form, devoid of abuses." A study of the Kagan clan in Homa Bay County documents the modern corruptions — professional inheritors, HIV risk, loss of land rights. And recent qualitative research in southwest Kenya on **sexual cleansing** — in Dholuo, tero chi liel — a rite distinct from guardianship, in which the widow's impurity is held to be removed by intercourse with the inheritor or a hired cleanser, records widows' own testimony of coercion, including the words "I was forced into it," alongside the belief that drives compliance: an uncleansed widow's impurity is "a source of misfortune for her and her children" — the misfortune named chira. The Adventist Encyclopedia notes widow cleansing as "a recent development in Luo culture… nowadays rarely practiced and dying out."

So this book presents tero whole: the protection it was built to give, the abuses Luo scholars and Luo widows themselves now document, and the live debate. Many Luo churches and elders today distinguish guardianship — care without the sexual rite — from the older full form. That distinction is where most contemporary teaching lands; whether it is where Nyangweso's own elders and widows land is a question to ask them, not to assume.

Chira and bad deaths

Chira is the old system's name for a wasting affliction — a person grows thin and declines — believed to follow the breach of chike, the rules: sowing or harvesting out of order, neglecting the widow rites, and other taboo violations. It was treated by the ajuoga, with manyasi herbal medicine. In the twentieth century the same word was extended to new wasting sicknesses. Teach chira as the moral immune system of the old order: the rules were not arbitrary, because breaking them was believed to sicken the breaker and endanger the house.

Some deaths were "bad deaths," and they were buried differently. The sources agree on the principle — burial follows "the status of the person and how he/she died" — and on the main cases.

Suicide. The dead person is ng'a modere. The body was believed liable to house a jachien, an evil spirit, and was **beaten to expel it**. Members of the Luo Council of Elders describing the custom in 2026 specify: where a person hanged himself, he was beaten before the rope was cut, and **the tree was uprooted and burned**. The body entered the homestead **not through the main gate but through a small opening, rot**. Maternal uncles gave the corpse strokes of the cane — seven, in one elder's account. Mourners were not to weep through the rites. Burial was **quick, with few mourners, outside the main homestead in secluded or abandoned ground, gunda**, and the dead person's **name was not given to another child**. The elders' stated purpose is pastoral, and it is quoted as they give it: "to discourage people from following this route and prevent the spirits from causing evil in our community."

The drowned and the lost. If the body could not be recovered, the Luo buried a substitute: Ocholla-Ayayo records burying a **yago fruit** in a cenotaph grave, "or bury it by the lakeshore for someone who died by drowning or whose body they could not recover." Another source likewise records burying a special tree's fruit, or the person's possessions, when a body was lost or eaten by a wild animal.

The unmarried. A man who died without having established his own home could not be buried as a homestead head — hence the hurried building of a simba or house for a dead son. For a woman, Ayodo records that it was "a disgrace for an adult woman to be buried on her father's land"; women who died after returning from a failed marriage were buried **outside the familial homestead**. And Mboya records the hardest case with ritual care rather than contempt: a virgin who died would be buried outside the homestead, but first an old woman ritually ended her virginity after the grave was dug, and **wedding songs were sung as if she were being married** — "to avert the possibility of her spirit coming to disturb those still alive."

The pattern beneath all three cases is consistent and teachable: the community feared an unplaced spirit, and even its exclusions were performed as rites of placement, not mere rejection.

Memorial feasts

The sequence did not end at burial. Shiino's Kanyamwa list closes with rapar — remembrance — and a final budho meal provided by the affines. In today's

practice, memorial services, often church-led and held on anniversaries, carry the same social work: the dead are named, the family is gathered, the grave is visited.

Roots to Remember

- The funeral was the largest rite of all — fourteen named acts at Kanyamwa, from announcement to remembrance.
- Ywak, the widow's wailing, was a formal language: announcement, honor, and protest.
- Tero buru drove the cattle through the dust to chase away the spirit of death; liedo's three shavings marked the mourners' road back.
- Tero was built as welfare — a widow kept her land, her children their father's name — and Luo scholars and widows themselves now document its abuses and debate its form.
- Even bad deaths were handled as rites of placement: no spirit was simply abandoned.

Chapter 22 — The Year's Gatherings

The old Luo had no festival dates, but they had a festival **year**. Assembled from the chapters of this part, the community gathered whole at these hinges — remembering always that this calendar is a reconstruction by season, since the old gatherings hung on seasons and events, not on dates.

Season (approx.)	The gathering
Oro — the dry season, especially January	**Inter-clan wrestling matches (amen)** — Owen: January, the driest month and the rest from farm work, was "the favourite time for the inter-clan wrestling matches." Post-harvest sports gatherings added tug of war, ajua, and boat racing.
Chwiri opens (February–March)	**Bilo**, in dangerous years: the elders' averting sacrifice before sowing; and **golo kodhi** in every village and homestead, in seniority order.
Planting and weeding (March–July)	**Work parties (konyir)** in rotation — the year's standing feast of labor, hosted and fed by each household in turn.
Drought, whenever it struck	**Clan sacrifice at the shrines** — Usenge Hill, Got Ramogi, the clan hembko — the elders supplicating for rain.
Keyo — harvest (about August, and the opon harvest)	**Dwoko cham and fwachira** — first-fruits feasting, the elders eating first, house by house in seniority order; and the harvest gift to the jabilo.
After harvest	**Sports and games gatherings**; marriages negotiated and celebrated in the season of full granaries.
All year, as they came	**Births**, with their visitation rounds; **nak** at the marketplace; **weddings**, with their multi-day feasting; and **funerals** — the largest gatherings of all, with vigil, tero buru, and a mourning sequence running through weeks of formal acts.

The heirs of the calendar

Two modern heirs of this calendar deserve notice. The first is the **harvest-thanksgiving services** of today's churches, which carry the first-fruits logic into Christian form in many Luo congregations — whether any Homa Bay congregation makes that link to fwachira consciously is a question for local inquiry, not an assumption. The second is documented and public: the **Piny Luo Festival**, held since 2021, including in Homa Bay, where amen wrestling is again performed

before crowds. The old gathering instinct, revived as cultural festival, is the year's calendar finding a new form.

Step back and see the whole design. The gatherings were never separate from the work: the feast crowned the sowing order, the wrestling filled the rest season, the work party was a feast, and the funeral gathered the clan more completely than any celebration. A people's calendar is its values made visible in time. The old Luo calendar said, in season after season: no one sows alone, no one eats first alone, no one grieves alone, and no one is forgotten. That is the root system this whole book exists to recover — and it is still, in every particular, a program a community can choose to live.

Roots to Remember

- The old year had no festival dates, but it had a festival year — gatherings hung on seasons and events.
- Wrestling in the dry season, bilo and golo kodhi at the sowing, fwachira at the harvest, konyir all through the working months.
- Funerals gathered the community more completely than any celebration.
- The calendar's heirs live on: church harvest thanksgivings and the Piny Luo Festival, where amen wrestling is performed again.
- The calendar was the values in time: no one sows alone, eats first alone, grieves alone, or is forgotten.

Part Four — The Century: A Hundred Years That Changed Everything

For centuries the world of the dala turned on the seasons, the clan, and the hearth. Then, within a single lifetime, a new order arrived on the lake shore: a tax that made every homestead need cash, steamers on the water, mission schools and printing presses, wars that carried the grandfathers away, and at last a nation of their own. This part tells that hundred years honestly — what was taken, what was built, and how the people, again and again, answered every shaking of their world by gathering together.

Chapter 23 — The Colonial Order, 1895–1963

The Tax That Rebuilt Society

The land that became South Nyanza was governed first from Uganda: Kisumu and Naivasha provinces formed part of Uganda's Eastern Province until they were transferred to the East Africa Protectorate in 1902. Flags and boundaries mattered less, in the end, than the instrument that reached into every dala: taxation.

Under the Native Administration Ordinance of 1900, a Hut Tax was first levied in the Protectorate in 1901 at two rupees per hut. Households in South Nyanza began paying Hut Tax in 1903 — the year the area was effectively colonized — at three rupees per hut. A Poll Tax followed in 1910, falling on adult men who were not hut owners: in effect, a tax on the young men, the warrior class, controversial even in the government's own correspondence. Ordinance No. 40 of 1915 raised the rate to five rupees. Then in 1920 the general rate jumped to ten rupees — almost double an unskilled laborer's monthly wage.

Understand this clearly, because everything else in this part grows from it: the tax was never only revenue. Its stated second purpose was to force men into wage labor — to make the dala need cash, so that sons would leave for the railway, the ports, the settler farms and the mines, and send money home. South Nyanza households answered with evasion tactics the official record itself preserves; the per-hut charge even shaped how people built and counted their houses. Every later transformation in this book — migrant labor, mission schools as a route to wages, the Luo Union's welfare work in distant towns, even the weakening of the elders' authority over grown sons — has the tax at its root. The colonial order did not merely rule the people. It rearranged the reasons a son left home.

Steamers, Ports, and the Lake Highway

The Uganda Railway reached Kisumu — Port Florence — in 1901, tying the lake to the coast. After the lake was surveyed and demarcated in 1906, the administration built out the southern ports: Homa Bay, Asembo Bay and Sio ports were established in 1911, on Uganda Railways records. Kendu Bay, Mbita and Kowuor ports followed later in the colonial period. Kendu Bay's pier served as the steamer landing for the whole Kisii hinterland — maize was stored there for shipment to Kisumu — and it remained an important port of call for steamers and ships from as far as Uganda and Tanzania.

The lake fleet of the era, converted to oil engines in 1914, included the SS Clement Hill, SS Nyanza, SS Winifred, SS Sybil and the tug Percy Anderson. In the First

World War the lake steamers were requisitioned for naval patrol and traffic with Tanganyika was cut. In peacetime the tonnage tells the story of a working highway: total lake traffic reached 122,517 tonnes in 1924 and 162,689 tonnes in 1926. Yet already the south shore was being left behind — Ford's 1955 assessment noted that the southern ports of Homa Bay and Kendu Bay were held back by poor transport service in the gulf, the beginning of a long marginalization of the south shore. After independence the railway ferry fleet still carried the town's name in MV Homa, and the port towns — Karungu (Sori), Kisumu, Homa Bay, Kendu Bay — persisted as settlements long after lake transport declined.

Hold this picture, because it reverses what most people assume: within living memory of today's oldest elders' grandparents, the lake was a highway with scheduled steamers, and Homa Bay and Kendu Bay were ports of call. The road-bound, steamer-less lake of today is the new condition, not the old one.



Lake Victoria at Homa Bay — the town shore and Homa Hill across the bay. In the steamer years this shore was a port of call on a scheduled lake highway. Photo: RogerCroti via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Chich Onuno Becomes Homa Bay, 1925

The town itself carries the century in its name. On the Homa Bay County Assembly's official account — the county government's own history, checked and standing — the place was originally known as Chich Onuno, Onuno's market.

Colonial officials renamed it Homa Bay in 1925, because it overlooked the Huma Hills in Karachuonyo. Visitors from overseas pronounced "Huma" as "Homa," and the residents adopted the name Homa Bay. A market of the people, renamed by a mispronunciation, kept by the people's own choice to use it: the whole colonial story in one word.

One caution belongs here, because this book's honesty is its authority. A prettier embellishment circulates in tourism material — that the Imperial British East Africa Company transferred an inland port to Chich Onuno in 1902. It is uncorroborated by any record this research could find, and so it is not printed here as fact. The documented port date for Homa Bay is 1911, and the documented renaming is 1925. Where the record is silent, this book says so; where the county's own official account speaks, this book follows it. Edwin should teach the same discipline to everyone who retells these stories after him: a root that needs inventing is not a root.

Chiefs, Mumbo, and the Politics of Resistance

Indirect rule governed through appointed chiefs, chosen — as the administrators' own reports admit — sometimes for supposed medicinal or magical powers, sometimes for wealth or seniority, where legitimate rulers were scarce. Where the old authority had grown from the clan, the new authority held a government warrant. The friction between those two kinds of power runs under everything that followed.

Resistance, when it came, first took religious form. Mumboism, the cult of Mumbo, the serpent god of Lake Victoria, spread across southwestern Kenya among Luo and Gusii between 1914 and 1934 under the prophet Onyango Dunde, preaching the end of the white man's order. The colonial state investigated it formally — S. H. Fazan's "Report on Investigation made concerning the Worship of Mumbo" was written in 1915 from the South Kavirondo Political Record Book — and suppressed it as sedition. Karungu, just south of today's county line, was a Mumbo center. Mumboism matters to this book because it shows the pattern that repeats all century: when the people's world is shaken, the response gathers them — around a prophet, a church, a union, a club — before it ever gathers them around a political party.

Organized politics began in the tax protests. The Young Kavirondo Association (YKA) was founded on 23 December 1921 at a meeting of some 8,000 people in Central Nyanza, by Maseno School students and teachers, with Jonathan Okwiri as president. Its demands read like a table of the century's grievances: repeal of the kipande registration-certificate laws, abolition of forced labor, reduction of hut and

poll tax, exemption of women from taxation, better wages, and a separate Legislative Council for Nyanza. In July 1923, CMS Archdeacon Walter E. Owen — the same Owen who had recorded the Podho tradition from Gor Mahia's own mouth — was made its president, and it was renamed the Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association (KTWA). Oginga Odinga's Not Yet Uhuru charges that Owen depoliticized the movement into tree planting, latrines and hand mills, with chiefs installed as ex-officio vice-presidents. In South Kavirondo, Ojijo Oteko of Karachuonyo is named as a founder of the KTWA locally and of the Piny Owacho Movement, campaigning against abusive chiefs. The name Piny Owacho is tangled in the sources — some journalism equates it with the YKA itself, and scholars also use it for a millenarian movement in Nyanza around 1913–14 — so this book names Ojijo Oteko's role and leaves the tangle flagged rather than resolving it falsely.

The Carrier Corps: The War That Took the Grandfathers

In the First World War, Britain fought Germany in East Africa with African muscle: the Carrier Corps, the porters who carried the army's food, ammunition and wounded through country no vehicle could cross. Recruitment ran by compulsion — volunteers, chiefs' quotas, and outright conscription under the 1915 Native Followers Recruitment Ordinance, which demanded 3,000 men a month. The documented totals are heavy reading: about 163,000 Kenyan Africans enrolled, and Uganda about 183,000. Kenya's recorded losses were 25,891 dead and 13,748 missing, on the Watkins Report of 1919. Nyanza Province supplied about half of all the men raised in Kenya — its district records are the clearest in the country. For the home area specifically, the record of the Mumbo inquiry preserves the figure of 34,000 men from South Kavirondo sent into the Carrier Corps through chiefs' quotas — and that in 1920, after the war, the District Commissioner ordered 5,000 more men out of the district for labor, men later seen bound by ropes around their necks.

East Africa-wide carrier deaths were estimated at about 100,000 by the historian Hodges in 1978, and a 2025 reassessment argues the official figures undercount. The survivors walked home into the 1918–19 influenza pandemic, which killed carriers' families in the same villages the war had emptied. Nairobi's Kariokor district and Dar es Salaam's Kariakoo are both named for the Corps — the war's footprint in the region's place-names. In the Second World War, recruitment again fell heavily on Nyanza; a commonly repeated summary figure holds that 162,000 men were recruited from Kenya in 1939–45, the majority from Nyanza and western Kenya, with 24,000 dead. That figure is carried here only as an attributed summary, not yet firmly verified, and it is printed with that caution attached. What

needs no caution is the shape of the thing: twice in thirty years, the grandfathers were taken. Whole locations learned what a government quota meant, and the memory of it shaped how the next generation heard every later call to organize.

The Missions: Schools, Writing, and a New Week

Three mission families reached South Nyanza, and each left a different mark.

The Seventh-day Adventists — Gendia, 1906, the first. The first SDA mission station in Kenya was opened at Gendia Hill, near Kendu Bay, on 27 November 1906, by Arthur A. Carscallen, a Canadian, and Peter Nyambo, from Nyasaland (Malawi), assisted by the German missionary Abraham C. Enns — on a five-acre plot about three kilometers inland from Kendu Bay, among the Luo of South Nyanza. The first Luo converts were baptized on 21 May 1911. Carscallen's deeper legacy is the written language itself. He was the first to reduce Dholuo to writing in a published grammar — his Elementary Grammar of the Nilotic-Kavirondo Language (Dhö Lwo), published in 1910. His translation of Matthew's Gospel in 1913 was the first Bible translation into an indigenous Kenyan language accepted by the British and Foreign Bible Society. He compiled a Dholuo dictionary of 4,004 terms between 1910 and 1914, never published, and in 1913 he set up the first printing press in western Kenya, at Gendia, publishing the magazine Jaote Luo (The Luo Messenger) and a Luo primer used in Adventist and non-Adventist schools alike. From Gendia the stations spread along the shore: Wire Hill, Rusinga Island, Kanyadoto, Karungu, and Kisii/Nyanchwa in 1912 among the Gusii, and Kamagambo — the station cluster that made South Nyanza, unusually for Kenya, Adventist country. Carscallen also introduced commercial cotton growing at Gendia. In the First World War the Canadian-born missionary was interned at Kaimosi on suspicion of being a German spy, and the work slowed.

The Mill Hill Catholics — Asumbi, 1913. The Mill Hill Fathers held the Upper Nile vicariate from 1894, when Nyanza was still Uganda's Eastern Province. Their first station in the area was Nyabururu in Gusii country, on 13 December 1911. In June 1913, Fr. Wall and Fr. Scheffer visited Asumbi, some 40 kilometers from Kisii, and began a catechism station. Asumbi Mission — the first Catholic mission for the Luo of South Kavirondo — was born in 1913, with Fr. Philip (Cornelius Philippus) Scheffer as superior. Scheffer, "Pilippo" to the people, ran Asumbi for the rest of his life, dying there on 23 March 1951. By then Asumbi had schools, a convent for African sisters, and a health clinic and hospital, and was reckoned to be the best mission station in South Nyanza. Asumbi Girls' High School was founded in 1936 by the Mill Hill Missionary Sisters and grew into a national school in Rangwe; Asumbi also seeded Nyabondo Mission in 1935.

The People's Story

Local telling adds its own color to Asumbi, and it is carried here as the people tell it, not as the record proves it. The name Asumbi, they say, comes from Asumbi Nono, the small earthenware pots used by juogi medicine men, and the ridge was earlier a feared spirit place called Nyahobe. Scheffer, the story goes, built a thatched church in 1915 that burned in 1917 — while the tabernacle survived — and a brick church was completed in 1928. The local telling also dates Scheffer's arrival to 1912, a year earlier than the documented 1913. The story is printed as story; the date in the record stands at 1913.

The CMS Anglicans — Maseno and Owen. The Church Missionary Society's regional base was Maseno, founded in 1906 under J. J. Willis, north of the gulf. Maseno School seeded the Young Kavirondo Association itself, and Archdeacon Owen embodies the era's entanglement: the missionary who wrote down the Podho tradition and translated and taught also became president of the taxpayers' association and, in Odinga's telling, its tamer. CMS influence in South Nyanza ran more through schools and personnel than through a station of Gendia's or Asumbi's scale of its own.

What the missions changed. Schools and literacy came first — and with literacy, the possibility of wage work, of reading the government's notices for oneself, of writing home. A written Dholuo followed, in which Luo custom itself would soon be recorded: Paul Mboya's 1938 book of Luo customs is a mission-school product. The seven-day week and Sunday rest were laid over the seasonal calendar. Mission medicine and dispensaries arrived. New crops and cash cropping came, cotton at Gendia among them. And there was sustained pressure against practices the missions condemned: nak tooth removal faded fastest where missions were strongest, and polygamy became the standing battleground. The missions gave the people tools the old world had never held — letters, print, the school certificate — and at the same time pressed hard against the customs that had held the old world together. Both halves of that sentence are true, and the century cannot be understood without holding both.

The African answer. The people did not only receive; they answered. Yohana (Johana) Owalo of Asembo, baptized in June 1906, reported being taken through the heavens on 1 March 1907 and called to found his own mission. He left CMS Maseno and founded the Nomiya Luo Mission — dated 1907 in church tradition, 1910 in Kenyan school accounts, with the name "Nomiya Luo Mission," "the mission that was given to me," formalized in 1914. Nomiya is regarded as the first

African Independent Church in Kenya, and Owalo built the first independent school. Bethwell Ogot called him "the first Christian rebel in Nyanza" — a Christian on his own terms. Nomiya kept Luo practice inside Christianity, notably refusing to demand that converts abandon polygamy. A generation later came the largest answer of all: Legio Maria, founded among Luo Catholics in 1962–63. Adherents date the revelation to 9 March 1962 at Suna, Migori, when the Holy Spirit was believed to reveal that Christ had returned as Simeo Ondeto. Co-founded by Ondeto (died 1991) and Gaudencia Aoko (1943–2018), headquartered on Got Kwer in Suna West, Migori, just south of the county line, Legio Maria had its own pope from 1964, was registered in 1966, and grew from about 100,000 members within the first year — a church claim — toward an estimated two million by the 1990s. It kept Catholic forms — Latin Mass, hierarchy, a pope — while accepting what Rome rejected. It is today one of the great living churches of Homa Bay, and its pilgrims at Kit Mikayi show the old sacred geography and the new faith sharing the same ground.

The pattern underneath. Step back from the three mission families and the two African answers, and one pattern covers the whole chapter. The tax shook the dala's economy; the people's answer was association — the YKA, then the KTWA. The missions shook the dala's faith; the people's answer was not surrender but authorship — Owalo founding Nomiya within a year of his baptism, and a later generation building Legio Maria into one of the largest churches of the region. Again and again in this century, the shaking came from outside and the gathering came from inside. Remember that pattern. The next chapter is its greatest example.

Roots to Remember

- The Hut Tax reached South Nyanza in 1903; by 1920 it stood at ten rupees — its purpose was not only revenue but to drive sons out to wage labor.
- The lake was once a steamer highway: Homa Bay, Asembo Bay and Sio ports opened in 1911, and Kendu Bay served the whole Kisii hinterland.
- Homa Bay was Chich Onuno, Onuno's market, until colonial officials renamed it in 1925 after the Huma Hills.
- Some 34,000 men from South Kavirondo were taken into the First World War Carrier Corps through chiefs' quotas; thousands never came home.
- Gendia (1906) gave Dholuo its first published grammar, its first accepted Bible portion, and western Kenya's first printing press; Asumbi followed in 1913.

Chapter 24 — The Luo Union: The People Organize Themselves

Unity Is Strength, Written Into an Institution

The tax scattered the sons. Wage labor carried Luo men to Kisumu, Nairobi, the settler farms, the docks and railways of Uganda and Tanganyika — places where a man could sicken, lose his work, or die among strangers, with no dala around him and no clan to carry him home. The answer the people built for that scattering is one of the great institutions of this book: the Luo Union, the East African Luo welfare association.

Its founding date is carried conventionally as 1922; scholars also write "early 1920s," and the honest record allows nothing more precise — this book prints 1922 as the conventional date, labeled as such. What is not in doubt is the Union's motto, documented in the scholarship of Matthew Carotenuto: **"Riwruok e teko" — unity is strength.** The phrase the Roots work carries today is not a slogan invented for a campaign. It is the documented operating principle of the Luo people's own greatest organization, and this chapter is its institutional home.

What the Union Did

The Union did in the colonial city what the dala and the clan had done at home. It buried the dead — no small thing for a people for whom burial at home, among one's own, is a matter of the deepest weight, and for migrants who died far from their fathers' land. It found work and lodging for new arrivals stepping off the train or the steamer in a strange town. It settled disputes between Luo men before they became the colonial courts' business. It ran welfare for Luo migrants across three territories — Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika. And underneath the practical work ran the deeper work: it taught a scattered people to act as one people. A man from Karachuonyo and a man from Alego, meeting in a Nairobi lodging house, were not strangers. They were the Union.

Its instruments were as practical as its purposes. In 1945 it built LUTATCO, its own transport company — the people's buses, carrying the people's goods and the people's bodies home. In 1947 came the Ramogi Press, a printing house named for the ancestor himself: the migrant generation putting its name in print. In 1949 the headquarters moved to Kisumu, the lake city at the center of the Luo world. Transport, print, welfare, burial: read the list slowly and you will see a dala rebuilt at the scale of a nation — a fence of belonging drawn around every Luo wherever the century had scattered him.

Notice, too, the map the Union drew. It was never only a Kenyan body. Its welfare ran across Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika — the three territories the lake and the railway had bound into one labor market, and the same three shores the steamers of the last chapter had served. A Luo dockworker in Dar es Salaam, a Luo clerk in Kampala, a Luo teacher in Nairobi: the Union claimed them all, and in claiming them it made a claim about what the people were. Colonial boundaries had divided the Luo among districts and territories administered from different capitals. The Union simply declined to notice. Under its motto, the scattered were one people with one obligation — to bury, to employ, to house, to defend one another — and it kept that obligation with dues, buses, printing presses and burial funds for nearly sixty years. Governments drew the borders. The Union drew the family.

Even the Union's names tell the story. Its press was not called the Luo Press or the Welfare Press. It was the Ramogi Press — named for Ramogi Ajwang, the ancestor of Part One, whose hill the migrants' descendants could no longer see from the towns where they now lived. A people that names its printing house after its founding ancestor is a people announcing that the scattering has not worked: the city is a place they live, not the place they are from. The Union's whole career is in that name. It never asked its members to choose between the modern town and the ancestral hill. It carried the hill into the town, in print, in buses, in burial funds — and when the state banned the Union itself, the name it had kept alive passed to the Council of Elders and the festival crowds on Got Ramogi, where this book's story of the century properly ends: with the people, gathered again, on the ancestor's own ground.

A Dala at the Scale of a Nation

To feel what the Union was, picture the journey it was built for. A young man leaves Karachuonyo because the tax demands cash his father's fields cannot give. He travels — by steamer across the gulf, by train from Kisumu — to work he has never seen, among people whose languages he does not speak. At home, if sickness took him, the dala would close around him: his mother would cook, his brothers would fetch the healer, and if he died, he would be carried to his father's land and buried among his own, with the cattle driven and the clan gathered. In the city, none of that existed — until the Union built it. The lodging found for the new arrival was the simba rebuilt in a rented room. The work found for the jobless was a brother's obligation, organized. The dispute settled inside the Union was the elders' council, sitting in a town hall instead of under a tree. And the burial — the body carried home across three territories if need be, so that no Luo need lie in a stranger's ground — was the dala's deepest law, kept by subscription and committee instead of by cattle and clan, but kept.

This is why the Union belongs in a book of roots and not only in a book of politics. Konyir had always said that the community survives by working together and feasting together. The dala had always said that a person is held by the people around his hearth. The Union simply drew the fence wider — around a whole people, scattered from Kampala to Dar es Salaam to Nairobi — and wrote the old law into a constitution with a motto on its letterhead. When later chapters of this book speak of harambee, of burial societies, of WhatsApp groups raising a funeral contribution in an evening, the reader should recognize the family resemblance. The forms keep changing. The law underneath them — no one carries his burden, or his coffin, alone — has not changed since the first dala was fenced.

The Banning, and What Succeeded It

The Union's end came by government hand. In 1980 the Moi government banned it, in the era when ethnic welfare associations were dissolved as threats to national unity. An organization that had buried the people's dead for nearly sixty years was closed by decree. The lesson the elders draw is not bitterness; it is that institutions built by the people can be ended by the state, but the instinct that built them cannot be decreed away.

The instinct found a new vessel. The Union's successor in the cultural sphere is the Luo Council of Elders, whose Ker today is Odungi Randa, installed in 2023 — in the ceremony at which the Podho tradition, the falling-from-the-sky story of Part One, was publicly retold. And the Council's convening power filled Got Ramogi, the ancestral hill itself, at the Piny Luo festival of December 2024 to January 2025. The line is unbroken: the dala gathered the family, the clan gathered the dala, the Union gathered the scattered, and the Council of Elders gathers the people still. Unity is strength was never a decoration. It was, and remains, the machinery by which this people survives its centuries.

Roots to Remember

- The Luo Union — founded, by the conventional date, in 1922 — carried the motto "Riwruok e teko": unity is strength.
- It did in the city what the dala did at home: buried the dead, found work and lodging, settled disputes, across Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika.
- Its instruments were the people's own: LUTATCO transport (1945), the Ramogi Press (1947), a Kisumu headquarters (1949).
- Banned in 1980, it was succeeded in the cultural sphere by the Luo Council of Elders, whose Ker Odungi Randa was installed in 2023.

Chapter 25 — Two Sons of the Soil: Gor Mahia and Tom Mboya

Gor Mahia: The Man

Two names carry the Homa Bay country into the mouths of millions who have never seen the lake. The first belongs to a chief of Kanyamwa, in today's Ndhiwa. Gor Mahia — Gor Wuod Ogada, remembered in the colonial record as Chief Gor Ogalo of Kanyamwa — was a real man: a chief of the colonial era, listed among the notable chiefs of Southern Nyanza. He is also, remarkably, one of the named sources of the written tradition itself: Archdeacon Owen's account of the Podho story, told in Part One of this book, came in part from "Gor Kogalo" of South Nyanza. The magician of legend sat with a missionary archdeacon and dictated the people's oldest story. The roots of the written record and the roots of the legend grow from the same man.

What can and cannot be fixed about him must be stated plainly, because a teaching book does not invent precision. He died in 1920 — of that the accounts agree — but the day is disputed: 9 May in some accounts, 15 May in others. His birth year is printed variously as about 1797, about 1805, and about 1835, and this book will not pretend to choose. His shrine stands at Sigama village, about two kilometers from Ndhiwa town.

Why will the dates not settle? Because Gor Mahia lived at the meeting point of two kinds of memory. The clan remembered him the way the clan remembers everything that matters — by generation, by event, by the stories told at the fire — and a man who looms that large in the telling gathers years to himself the way a hill gathers mist. The colonial record, which wrote down his chiefship and his death, was kept by men who had arrived in his country the day before yesterday and often could not spell his name the same way twice. Between a memory that counts in generations and a record that counts in calendar years but barely knew the man, a birth year cannot be fixed — and the honest book says so, prints the rival years side by side, and moves on. Edwin will meet this problem everywhere in the old material, and the rule of this book is the rule he should teach: where the sources conflict, show the conflict. A teacher who hides uncertainty teaches his students to invent; a teacher who shows it teaches them to dig.

The People's Story

Around the man grew the legend, and the legend is told here as the people tell it — as story, not as record. In the telling, Gor Mahia was the greatest jajuok — magician and seer — the Luo have known. He foresaw the coming of the white man and his iron snake, the railway, before either appeared. His powers, the stories say, defeated rivals and colonial officers alike; no enemy's medicine could stand against his, and no prison of the new order could hold the old power he carried. His name still commands the mixture of pride and fear reserved for true power. The legend is not a footnote to the man. The legend is what his name carries into every stadium in Kenya — which is why this book tells it fully, and labels it honestly.

Gor Mahia: The Club

On 17 February 1968, two Nairobi clubs — Luo Union FC and Luo Sports Club — merged to form Gor Mahia Football Club. Note the direct line from the last chapter: the club is quite literally a child of the Luo Union, born of the Union's own teams. It took the magician's name deliberately, to carry his aura of invincibility onto the football field, and its nickname, K'Ogalo — "the stone," the hard one — keeps the Kanyamwa chief's other name in weekly use by millions who have never heard of Ndhiwa. When Homa Bay's sons cheer K'Ogalo, they are cheering a chief of Kanyamwa. Few institutions in modern Kenya carry a clan ancestor so far, so loudly, and so joyfully.

Tom Mboya: Rusinga's Son

The second name belongs to Rusinga. Thomas Joseph Mboya was born on 15 August 1930 at Kilima Mbogo, near Thika — on a sisal estate where his father worked — to parents from Rusinga Island: Leonardus Ndiege and Marcella. The correction matters and this book insists on it: Mboya was not born on Rusinga. He was Rusinga's son by blood and by burial, not by birthplace — and a heritage book that cannot keep a birthplace straight has no business teaching anything else.

His formation is the century in miniature. He was educated in mission schools — the world of Gendia and Asumbi, of Carscallen's grammar and the printed word — and he rose through the trade union movement, the world of the scattered wage-earners the tax had created and the Union had gathered. Church school and labor union: those were the two ladders out of the dala that the colonial order had built, and Mboya climbed both faster than any man of his generation. By his early thirties he was independent Kenya's Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs,

and then Minister for Economic Planning and Development. Two documented achievements belong in this book. The first is the Airlift. In 1959 Mboya organized Airlift Africa: 81 Kenyan students flown to American universities with the African-American Students Foundation. After his appeal to Senator John F. Kennedy, the Kennedy Foundation underwrote the 1960 airlift of about 230 students. In total, roughly 800 East African students went to North American universities between 1959 and 1963 — among them Wangari Maathai and Barack Obama Sr. For a heritage book, the airlift is harambee at national scale: a community taxing itself and its friends to send its children to learn. The second is Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965, "African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya," authored with Mwai Kibaki — the founding economic charter of the republic. His planning ministry was credited with Kenya's roughly 7 percent growth of the late 1960s. His 1963 autobiography is Freedom and After.



Tom Mboya of Rusinga — portrait photograph, 1962, seven years before his assassination. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

1969: The Year the Break Came

Mboya was assassinated on 5 July 1969 in Nairobi. He was buried at Kasawanga, on Rusinga Island; his mausoleum was built in 1970 and gazetted a national monument on 9 March 2001, and the American journalist and family friend Scheinman lies buried beside him. Four months after the assassination, on 25

October 1969, President Kenyatta came to Kisumu to open the Soviet-built New Nyanza Provincial General Hospital — "Russia Hospital." The crowd heckled; stones were thrown; the presidential guard fired into the crowd. The official death toll was 11; other estimates run to 50, even 100, and survivor testimony has been gathered and published in recent years. The Kenya People's Union was banned days later, on 30 October 1969; Oginga Odinga was detained; Kenya became a de facto one-party state; and Kenyatta never returned to Nyanza.



The Tom Mboya Mausoleum at Kasawanga, Rusinga Island — built in 1970 and gazetted a national monument in 2001. Photo: Wycondi via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

A heritage book need not litigate politics, but it must record 1969 honestly. The political cold that settled over the Luo counties for a generation — and the association of election seasons with police shootings in Kisumu, Homa Bay, Siaya and Migori ever since — begins in that year. It is the year the region's relationship with the state broke, and the break shaped everything the elders of today grew up inside. Gor Mahia's name went up in lights in the stadium the year before the break; Mboya's grave on Rusinga marks the break itself. Between the magician's legend and the planner's mausoleum stands the whole modern story of this people: gifted, gathered, and grieving — and still here.

There is a reason these two names, of all the century's names, are the ones a Homa Bay child learns first. Gor Mahia stands for the old power — the world of the

dala, the seer, and the clan, carried into the most modern arena Kenya has, the football stadium, and cheered there every week by people who may know nothing else of Kanyamwa. Mboya stands for the new power — the mission school, the written word, the union card, the airplane — and for the price the region paid when that power was cut down at thirty-eight years of age. A heritage that keeps only the first name becomes nostalgia. A heritage that keeps only the second becomes grievance. This book keeps both, side by side, because the people Edwin serves are the children of both: rooted in the dala, schooled in the century, and still deciding what to build with the two together.

Roots to Remember

- Gor Mahia — Gor Wuod Ogada, Chief Gor Ogalo of Kanyamwa — died in 1920; his birth year is genuinely uncertain, and this book prints it as uncertain.
- The legend of Gor Mahia the great jajuok, who foresaw the white man and the iron snake, is the people's story — told fully, labeled honestly.
- Gor Mahia FC, formed 17 February 1968 from the Luo Union's own clubs, carries his name and his nickname K'Ogalo to this day.
- Tom Mboya was born at Kilima Mbogo in 1930 to parents from Rusinga; his airlift sent some 800 East Africans to North American universities.
- His assassination on 5 July 1969, and the Kisumu shootings that October, broke the region's trust with the state for a generation.

Chapter 26 — Independence to Today, 1963–2026

The Harambee Era

Independence came on 12 December 1963, and Jomo Kenyatta's watchword — harambee, "all pull together" — made self-help the republic's development engine. Communities taxed themselves to build the schools, clinics, cattle dips and water projects the state could not yet fund. The word itself carries the older root this book keeps returning to: Kenyan educational summaries equate the Luo konyir, the communal work party, with harambee. The national slogan, in other words, baptized an institution the Luo and their neighbors had practiced for centuries — the work party that feasts together when the work is done. In Nyanza the harambee decades built the secondary schools whose names still anchor every location's pride, many of them on or beside the mission stations of the last chapter, and the Luo Union ran its welfare machine at full stretch until its banning in 1980 closed the era of ethnic self-help organization.

Understand what harambee asked of a family, because it explains both its triumphs and its weight. The state did not arrive with a school; the community taxed itself — household by household, in cash and in labor — and built the school, then petitioned the state to staff it. For a people whose grandfathers had been taxed by compulsion to fund an empire, here was taxation inverted: the same discipline of contribution, but the collector was the community itself and the building rose in sight of the contributors' homes. That is why the harambee school carries a location's pride in a way a government building never quite does. The walls are the people's own money, made visible. When Edwin's generation speaks of pulling together, they are not reaching for a foreign idea or even only a national slogan. They are remembering what their own grandparents' hands built, one contribution at a time.

The Lake Transformed: Perch, Ngege, and the Weed

No change in the century cut deeper into daily life than the transformation of Lake Victoria's fishery, because fish was protein, income and identity at once.

The old lake. Michael Graham's first systematic fisheries survey, in 1927–28, found the catch dominated by two native tilapias, above all the ngege (Oreochromis esculentus): "the most important food fish of the lake, whether for native or non-native consumption." The haplochromine cichlids — hundreds of small species found nowhere else on earth — made up the great bulk of the lake's fish.

The introductions. Exotic tilapias were stocked from the early 1950s, including into the Winam Gulf in 1953–54. The Nile perch (Lates niloticus, in Dholuo mbuta) was, on the documented account, surreptitiously introduced from Uganda in 1954, while officials still argued about whether to allow it; once its presence was discovered, official introductions followed in 1962 and 1963. The early-1960s "Uhuru Rains" raised the lake, flooded the shoreline breeding grounds, and let the introduced tilapias establish.

The boom. Perch catches climbed from about 335 tonnes in 1975 to a peak of 380,776 tonnes in 1990 — the Nile perch boom, which built fish factories around the gulf, pulled the catch into export markets, and made fortunes that largely left the shore. Kenya's Lake Victoria landings reached 77,327 tonnes in 1983. The cost is documented with equal precision (Cowx and colleagues, 2003, with KMFRI and FIRRI authors): haplochromines crashed from 83 percent of fish biomass in the 1970s to under 1 percent by the mid-1980s, with an estimated 40 percent of haplochromine species driven to extinction. The ngege was extirpated from the open lake by competition and hybridization with the introduced Nile tilapia, surviving in satellite lakes and ponds. A 184-kilogram perch specimen is preserved at the Kisumu Museum — the boom's monument, and its warning.

The decline. The perch stock was then fished down. KMFRI trawl surveys in Kenyan waters in 1997–99 already showed perch overexploited, with an exploitation rate of about 0.96 and shrinking fish sizes. KMFRI Catch Assessment Surveys recorded Nile perch and tilapia catches falling 34.2 percent in 2014 — from 251,063 tonnes to 165,084 tonnes — and a further roughly 65.9 percent in 2015, from 59,681 tonnes to 20,371 tonnes, lake-wide survey figures as reported by KMFRI's Catch Assessment Surveys department in 2017, while dagaa (omena) rose. Hydroacoustic surveys put lake-wide perch biomass at about 1.13 million tonnes in 2015, falling to about 0.851 million tonnes in 2016, with Kenya's share of the perch biomass down 31 percent between the September 2014 and August 2016 surveys. KMFRI scientists name the causes plainly: overfishing, illegal small-mesh nets taking immature fish, destruction of breeding grounds, and declining water quality. Beside these numbers stand the shore's social wounds: the jaboya system — fish-for-sex arrangements between fishermen and women traders — and the women-led "No Sex for Fish" answer to it grew directly out of the scarcity the boom and bust created.

The weed. Water hyacinth entered the lake by the Kagera River: reported in Uganda in 1989 and in Kenyan waters in 1990, though some Kenyan sources say first sighted in 1992. It peaked lake-wide at at least 17,374 hectares in 1998, with Kisumu Bay in the Winam Gulf the worst-infested water in Kenya — mats blocking landing beaches, ferry routes and water intakes; Kisumu's municipal water supply

fell 25 percent in 1999. Biological control with weevils, with KARI and KMFRI partners, plus El Niño conditions, reduced the Kenyan-side cover from about 6,000 hectares to roughly 400 hectares by the early 2000s. But the weed resurges seasonally and remains, in recent studies of the Winam Gulf, a persistent dry-season presence along the gulf's shore. For lakeshore elders, the hyacinth is a datable memory: the years the lake closed.

HIV: The Epidemic That Took a Generation of Elders

Homa Bay has for years carried Kenya's highest county HIV prevalence, and the figures must be printed with the caution the official source itself attaches to them: the National Syndemic Diseases Control Council warns that figures from different estimate rounds are not strictly comparable. Print the trend, therefore — a terrible peak, then a long, real decline — and not a false precision. The published series runs: about 27.5 percent in 2009; a peak of 26.5 percent in 2017; 15.2 percent in 2023, against a national rate of 3.3 percent; and for 2024, 10.6 percent in the Kenya HIV Estimates as listed by Stats Kenya — in that same listing Kisumu stood at 11.7 percent and Migori at 10.5 percent — with the Council's 2025 estimates for adults aged 15 to 49 putting Homa Bay at 11.41 percent: 104,317 people living with HIV in the county, and 1,092 HIV deaths in 2024. County reporting credits the treatment scale-up with cutting mother-to-child transmission from 18 percent to 5.3 percent and reaching about 96 percent viral suppression among those on treatment.

The drivers named in the research are this book's own subject matter colliding with a virus: widow inheritance practiced without safeguards; low traditional male circumcision — the Luo did not circumcise, while the Suba did; the jaboya fish economy of the scarcity years; and, in a modeling study by Prof. Samuel M. Mwalili of Strathmore University, reported in 2025 — "disco matanga," the funeral discos, estimated to have contributed about 7.8 percent of HIV infections in western Kenya between 1980 and 2024, peaking at 9.9 percent in 2004. Sit with that last figure. The funeral — the very institution that gathered the community, the beating heart of the old way — became a transmission site. Few facts explain the epidemic's cultural wound better.

The human structure underneath the statistics is the one Edwin's generation knows by sight: a missing generation of parents; grandparents raising orphaned grandchildren on the dala — elders giving their only meal to grandchildren, in the phrase of a 2025 Homa Bay elderly-care report, carried here for its truth to life rather than as a statistic; and a graveyard in every homestead filling faster than the elders could teach. The urgency recorded throughout this book — gather the old wisdom while the rememberers still live — is not sentimentality. The epidemic

is a documented reason the rememberers are fewer than they should be. In 2025, cuts to United States donor funding (PEPFAR) disrupted HIV programs in the county, including the DREAMS program for girls — a present danger the book records carefully and briefly, because the treatment system the county's survival now depends on was shaken in a single budget season.

Devolution: Homa Bay County, 2013–Today

The 2010 Constitution created 47 counties, and Homa Bay County was founded on 4 March 2013, assembled from the former districts of the old South Nyanza. Its first governor was Cyprian Awiti, serving 2013 to 2022; Gladys Wanga succeeded him after the elections of 9 August 2022. The county's senator, Moses Otieno Kajwang', first took the seat in a 2015 by-election after the death of his brother Gerald Otieno Kajwang'. The county's people numbered 963,794 in the 2009 census and 1,131,950 in the 2019 census — 539,560 male and 592,367 female — on 3,154.7 square kilometers of land, in eight sub-counties: Homa Bay, Ndhiwa, Rachuonyo North, Rachuonyo East, Rachuonyo South, Rangwe, Suba North and Suba South. The national statistics office projected about 1.23 million residents by 2023.

Devolution moved real money and real decisions — health, agriculture, water, county roads — to Homa Bay town, within sight of Got Huma, the hill the town was misnamed for. For the first time since the colonial chiefs, the county's development choices are formally made by its own elected people. What they choose to fund — and whether the roots survive the choosing — is the open chapter this book is being written into.

Look once more at the county's own map, because it preaches its own sermon. The eight sub-counties carry the old names into the new order: Rachuonyo North, Rachuonyo East and Rachuonyo South on the land of Karachuonyo; Suba North and Suba South on the islands and shores of the Suba; Ndhiwa, Rangwe and Homa Bay keeping the names the clans and the town have always carried. The colonial century redrew the people's boundaries half a dozen times — province, district, division, location — and every redrawing was meant to make the people administrable. Devolution's map, whatever its makers intended, reads like the clan map wearing a uniform. The roots did not only survive the century. In the end, the century's newest institution found itself governing by their names.

Roots to Remember

- Harambee, the national call to pull together, baptized an institution the Luo had practiced for centuries: konyir, the communal work party.
- The ngege ruled the old lake; the Nile perch, slipped in during 1954, boomed to 380,776 tonnes in 1990 — and haplochromines fell from 83 percent of the lake's fish to under 1 percent.
- Water hyacinth peaked at over 17,000 hectares in 1998; elders date the years the lake closed by it.
- HIV peaked at about 26.5 percent prevalence in Homa Bay in 2017 and has since declined to roughly 11 percent — but it took a generation of parents, and grandparents raised the orphans.
- Since 4 March 2013, Homa Bay County — over 1.1 million people — has governed its own development from Homa Bay town.

Chapter 27 — A Century of Daily Life

History is usually told in governments and wars. This chapter tells the same century the way it was actually lived: what changed, decade by decade, in the daily life of an ordinary person in the Homa Bay area — what he paid, where he worked, what he ate, how he buried his dead, and who gathered around him. Every entry below is documented in the chapters of this part.

Decade	How daily life changed
1900s	Hut Tax reaches South Nyanza (1903, three rupees a hut) — the dala needs cash for the first time. The railway reaches Kisumu (1901); the lake becomes a steamer highway. The SDA mission opens at Gendia (1906), the first mission in South Nyanza; CMS at Maseno (1906). Johana Owalo's vision (1907) seeds the first African Independent Church. Life is still ordered by seasons, clan and hearth; nak initiation is universal.
1910s	Poll Tax (1910) falls on young men. Ports open at Homa Bay, Asembo Bay and Sio (1911). Asumbi Catholic mission founded (1913); Carscallen's Dholuo grammar (1910), Matthew's Gospel (1913) and the Gendia press (1913) put Luo into print. The First World War: the Carrier Corps takes South Kavirondo's men — 34,000 through chiefs' quotas; thousands never return; the 1918–19 flu follows them home. Mumboism spreads (1914–34): the serpent god promises the white man's end.
1920s	Tax jumps to ten rupees (1920) — sons must leave for wages. The YKA is founded (1921) and becomes the KTWA under Owen (1923); Ojijo Oteko organizes in Karachuonyo. Chich Onuno is renamed Homa Bay (1925). The Luo Union is founded (conventionally 1922): the migrant's burial society and welfare net. Graham's survey (1927–28) still finds ngege king of the lake. Mission schools multiply; the first literate generation reads the notices that govern it.
1930s	Paul Mboya of Karachuonyo writes Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi (1938) — Luo custom in Luo print, from inside. Asumbi Girls' School is founded (1936). Bridewealth herds are still large — 15 to 20 head in the area by 1936 counts, 40 to 60 in earlier memory. The dala remains the school, the bank and the court — but its sons are increasingly absent at work.
1940s	Second World War recruitment falls heavily on Nyanza. The Luo Union builds its machine: LUTATCO transport (1945), Ramogi Press (1947), headquarters to Kisumu (1949). Mary Leakey finds the Proconsul skull on Rusinga (1948) — the island enters world science. Returning soldiers bring cash, new skills and new expectations; nak begins its long retreat where missions are strong.
1950s	The lake is stocked against its nature: exotic tilapias (Winam Gulf, 1953–54), the Nile perch slipped in (1954). Emergency-era Kenya passes the region by politically,

Decade	How daily life changed
	but not economically. Mission and harambee schools spread; a school certificate becomes the family's best investment. Radios arrive; the week's rhythm is now set by Sunday and market day as much as by season.
1960s	Independence (1963); harambee builds schools across the county. The Uhuru Rains flood the shore and the introduced fish establish; official perch introductions follow (1962–63). Legio Maria is founded (1962–63) — Africa's largest Catholic secession is a Luo movement. Gor Mahia FC is formed (1968) from the Luo Union's own clubs. Mboya's airlift sends hundreds to American universities. Then 1969: Mboya assassinated; the Kisumu shootings; the KPU banned. A political winter begins.
1970s	Perch appears in catches in the mid-1970s and climbs. Funerals grow into the great social institution — tero buru at full strength, herds still remembered at 40 head and more. Land subdivision presses the clan map; sons' plots shrink. The dala's authority thins as school and wage decide futures the elders once decided.
1980s	The perch boom peaks toward 380,776 tonnes (1990): fish factories, export money, crowded beaches — and haplochromines crash from 83 percent of biomass to under 1 percent; ngege vanishes from the open lake. The Luo Union is banned (1980). HIV arrives silently mid-decade; by the decade's end the funerals are changing character. Water hyacinth reaches the lake (1989).
1990s	The epidemic's terrible decade: prevalence climbs toward its peak; funerals multiply; disco matanga spreads infection even as it mourns it; grandparents begin raising orphans in earnest. Hyacinth mats close Kisumu Bay and choke the Winam Gulf (peak 1998); Kisumu's water supply drops. Perch stocks thin and shrink. Multiparty politics returns (1992), but the lake economy that fed the region is broken-backed.
2000s	The treatment era: antiretroviral drugs roll out; mother-to-child transmission falls; prevalence begins its long decline from the peak of about 26 percent recorded in the 2017 estimate round. Weevil biocontrol beats the hyacinth back on the Kenyan shore (6,000 hectares to roughly 400). Mobile phones leapfrog the region — M-Pesa (2007) puts the bank in the dala. Fish catches keep falling in KMFRI surveys; jaboya and "No Sex for Fish" name the shore's moral crisis.
2010s	Devolution (2013): Homa Bay County governs itself — Awiti, then Wanga (2022). The Olusuba Bible is published (2011); the Rusinga Cultural Festival begins (2012) — the Suba revival becomes public. Kit Mikayi is inscribed by UNESCO (2019). HIV prevalence falls through the teens toward about 15 percent (2023). Smartphones, WhatsApp and social media rewire the clan: the burial contribution is now raised in a WhatsApp group — konyir's newest form, for better and worse.
2020s	COVID-19 (2020–21) restricts the great funerals themselves — an unthinkable interruption of the gathering instinct. Prevalence reaches about 10.6 to 11.4 percent (2024 estimates); 104,317 county residents live with HIV; PEPFAR cuts

Decade	How daily life changed
	(2025) shake the treatment system. The Piny Luo festival at Got Ramogi (December 2024–January 2025) crowns two presidents as elders — the roots visibly re-entering national life. The CBO generation — Edwin's — begins the deliberate work of recovery this book serves.

Two threads run through every row, and a teacher should point them out by name. The first is loss, and it is real: the steamer, the ngege, the Union, a generation of parents — each decade took something the decade before had relied on, and no honest book may soften that. The second thread is the answer, and it is just as real: not one decade in the table ends with the people scattered and silent. Each ends with them gathered in some new form — an association, a church of their own founding, a union, a club, a harambee committee, a WhatsApp group raising a burial fund. Loss is the century's weather. Gathering is the people's climate. Weather changes; climate is what a people is.

Read the table once more, slowly, and notice what it proves: in every single decade, the people answered. Taxed, they organized. Scattered, they unionized. Evangelized, they founded their own churches. Bereaved, they raised one another's children. The century changed everything about how life is lived in Homa Bay — except the gathering instinct itself. That instinct is the root. It is still alive. The rest of this book is about what to do with it.

Roots to Remember

- The century's changes came in waves a family could date: the tax (1903), the ports (1911), the renaming (1925), the wars, independence (1963), the perch, the epidemic, devolution (2013).
- In every decade the people's answer took the same shape: they gathered — in associations, unions, churches, clubs, and burial societies.
- The gathering instinct survived the tax, the missions, the one-party state, and the epidemic. It is the root this book exists to water.

Part Five — The Voice, the Dress, and the Table

A people's roots are not only in their land and their houses. They are in the words on their tongues, the clothes on their backs, the songs in their throats, and the food on their mats. This part of the book listens to the Luo voice — its proverbs, its greetings, its stories, its music — and then looks at what the body wore, what the table carried, what law governed the lake, and what the hands made. Nearly everything in these chapters rests on published sources, and the greatest of them is one book Edwin can hold in his own hands: Asenath Bole Odaga's Luo Proverbs and Sayings, gathered from named elders between 1976 and 1982. Where the record is the people's own story rather than a document, the book says so. Where the record runs out, the book says that too — and leaves the question for the elders of Nyangweso.

Chapter 28 — The Proverbs: The Wisdom of the Fireside

The Luo word ngeche covers proverbs, sayings, similes and riddles together, and no part of the old education was more honored than this one. Asenath Odaga, a research fellow of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Nairobi, spent the years 1976 to 1982 gathering ngeche from the elders themselves — among them Jaduong' Paul Mboya, Simeon Nyende, John Ogodo Abok, Opiyo Owuor, Christopher Obaje and Heston Odhiambo Abok, and several women elders — and published them as Luo Proverbs and Sayings (Lake Publishers, Kisumu, 1995; new edition 2005). In her closing essay she explains what ngeche are for: they demonstrate knowledge and skill in the language; they are used to chide someone, to answer a question, to illustrate, clarify or drive home a point; and they are, in her words, "particularly valuable in the education of the youth by adults." That is exactly the use this book is for.

Every proverb in this chapter comes from Odaga's published collection, in her spelling. One warning belongs at the door: Dholuo is a tonal language, and the printed page does not carry the tone. Read these lines, learn them — and then have an elder speak them aloud, because the voice, not the page, is the senior teacher. The proverbs are grouped the way life groups them: unity, elders, work, patience, speech, wealth, death and God — and at the end, a few sayings about roots and leadership that this book could not leave behind.

Unity and Togetherness

The first theme is the theme of this whole book. The old people did not merely praise togetherness; they built a fence of sayings around it, so that a child heard from every side that no one stands alone.

> **Kogno achiel ok neg onyuogo.**
>
> "One thumb does not crush a louse."
>
> Joint effort is called for. Odaga's own gloss: "Unity is strength" — the proverb to set beside the phrase riwruok e teko.

> **Ng'at achiel ok yie tat dero.**
>
> "One person alone cannot put a roof on the granary."
>
> Some tasks call for joint effort; nobody roofs the dero alone.

Ithanyri ka yap ng'at achiel

"As shallow as one man's pond."

One person's effort makes only a shallow pond; in certain instances joint effort creates the better impact. (Odaga no. 225; also recorded as Othanyore ka yap ng'at achiel.)

Kata iriek ok inyal lielo wiyi kendi.

"No matter how accomplished a person is, he cannot shave his own hair."

Everyone needs others.

Kitembe notamo ruoth.

"Even the chief did not own kitembe seeds."

No person, not even a chief, is totally self-sufficient.

Loch noloyo Ngadi.

"Even chief Ngadi lacked something."

No person can have everything; we depend on each other.

Goyo bat piny.

"To bring the arm down."

To surrender a quarrel, compromise, and accept to work together.

Ber wuotho gi jating' kom kata ja kol kudho.

"It is good to travel with a stool-carrier, a companion who can also extract a thorn from your foot."

No one is an island; no one is self-sufficient.

Gode ok rom, dhano to rom.

"Hills never meet, but human beings do."

Deal carefully with others; one day you may need their help.

> **Oyieyo mathoth ok kuny bur.**
>
> "Many rats do not dig a hole."
>
> The counterweight: many cooks spoil the broth. Togetherness works when it is organized, not when responsibility is diffused.

Elders and Respect

The second fence of sayings guards the place of the old. Respect for elders was not politeness; it was the constitution of the homestead, and the proverbs taught a child where to sit, when to listen, and why the gray head is a library.

> **Ok inyal puonjo dani madho kwesi.**
>
> "You cannot teach your grandmother how to smoke a pipe."
>
> Age brings wisdom and knowledge through experience.

> **Nyathi ok bed e kom kama jomadongo nitie.**
>
> "A child does not sit on a stool at a meeting where older men are meeting."
>
> Age brings respect and wisdom; the young take their proper place and listen.

> **Ru ruath e mewone.**
>
> "The longer a bull lives, the fatter it becomes."
>
> Age is experience; wisdom grows with age.

> **Jowi mager ema ichuogo piene.**
>
> "It is the fierce buffalo whose skin makes the crescent shield."
>
> The experienced, battle-tested elder's advice is the advice sought when there is a problem.

> **Iming' ka mane ok oninde siwindhe.**
>
> "As ignorant as a person who never slept in the siwindhe."
>
> Odaga's own explanation: the siwindhe was the old woman's house where young people were taught Luo traditions and cultural values, including storytelling, social ethics and sex education. To have missed the siwindhe was to have missed school itself.

> **Dhano ipuonjo nyaka tho.**
>
> "A person is taught until death."
>
> Learning never ends, not even for the old.

> **Tin ok en fuwo.**
>
> "Youth is not stupidity or ignorance."
>
> The balance to all the above: even a young person may have something to teach an older person.

> **Geno lep Nyakeno.**
>
> From the custom that the tongue of a slaughtered animal is always for the old men: Nyakeno expected the tongue, and his wife had eaten it.
>
> Respect is not only spoken; it is served, in meat — a saying the chapter on the table will meet again.

Work

The third fence guards the field and the granary. The old people honored sweat the way they honored age, and their sayings about work are short, hard, and impossible to argue with.

> **Kinda e teko.**
>
> "Perseverance is strength."
>
> The whole ethic of work in three words.

> **Kinda e loyo lweny.**
>
> "Perseverance is victory."
>
> Endurance, not force, wins the fight.

> **Kinda ne omiyo opuk oyombo apuoyo.**
>
> "Perseverance made the tortoise beat the hare."
>
> The tortoise-and-hare tale in one line; drop by drop fills the bucket.

Jakinda ema keyo.

"The person who perseveres is the one who harvests."

The harvest belongs to the one who stayed.

Kich ithodho to kecho.

"Honey is harvested while the bees are stinging."

Success comes with hard work and perseverance; sweetness is not gathered without pain.

Chung'ni ok miyi.

"Standing still, doing nothing, does not feed you."

Your effort is what pays.

Chamo to e timo.

"Eating is not doing."

It is easier to eat served food than to work for it.

Gima ichuoyo ema ikayo.

"What you sow is what you reap."

Effort determines the life one leads.

Luchi ema ichamo.

"It is your own sweat that you eat."

You live by what your own effort produces.

Giri ema chodi luya.

"It is your own possession that makes you sweat."

Achievement through one's own sweat gives satisfaction.

Monjo rapur.

"Whoever tills the land does not come out with nothing."

No hard work is without positive result.

> **Ng'ama dwaro ema yudo.**
> "It is the one who searches who finds."
> Effort, hard work and perseverance are rewarded.

> **Matin matin ema pong'o ondong'.**
> "Little by little fills the ondong' (the small measuring basket)."
> Chip by chip fells a mountain.

> **Mbaka nyapong' gi dero.**
> "The contest between the grinding stone and the granary."
> The small stone grinds a little grain at a time until it has ground all that is in the dero; keeping at it accomplishes the job.

> **Chako chon loyo dhi ajuoga.**
> "Beginning early is better than going to the medicine man."
> Prevention is better than cure; start in good time.

Patience

If work is the Luo engine, patience is its governor. The sayings of this group slow the young down — not to make them lazy, but to make them last.

> **Agulu mi rito ok yieny.**
> "A pot that is being waited for takes long to boil."
> Anxiety stretches time; patience.

> **Bed mos pod ok ineno kang' eyi.**
> "Be patient; you have not yet seen your back."
> A caution to youth: to "see your back" is to have children of your own; experience comes only through life's hurdles.

> **Chuny teko loyo rikni.**
> "A strong, calm heart is better than hastiness."
> Perseverance and calmness beat hurry.

> **Jarikni ja a nono.**
> "A person ever in a hurry gets away with nothing."
> Slow but sure wins the race.

> **Ja rikni ja muod nyoyo gi kuoyo.**
> "The ever-hurrying person eats his maize-and-beans with grit in it."
> Hurry, hurry has no blessing.

> **Mos mos e wuoth.**
> "Slowly, slowly is the journey."
> Slow but sure.

> **Luw mabor to ichopi.**
> "Follow the longer route and you will arrive safely."
> Take time for lasting solutions rather than hurried decisions.

> **Maliet ema kwe.**
> "That which is hot cools off."
> Nothing lasts forever; be patient.

> **De nyuok.**
> "Strangle a he-goat."
> Be brave, be patient, persevere — the he-goat is the byword for stubborn endurance.

Speech and Words

No theme in Odaga's collection is guarded more carefully than the tongue. The old people knew that a word, once released, travels further than a drumbeat and cuts deeper than a knife — so they taught truth-telling, listening, and the holiness of silence in the same breath.

> **Adier en kwiri.**
> "Truth is poisonous."
> Truth kills falsehood.

Adiera ok tow.

"Truth does not rot."

The truth always remains true.

Adiera ok um.

"Truth cannot be covered."

Speak the truth and shame the devil.

Dhok e tung dhano.

"The mouth is a human being's horn."

Animals defend themselves with horns; human beings defend themselves with speech.

Wach loyo bul gi long'o.

"The word travels further than the sound of the drum."

The spoken word is more powerful than the drum.

Wacho ok e timo.

"Saying is not doing."

Action speaks louder than words.

Lewi bith ka opila.

"Your tongue is as sharp as a peel from maize, sorghum or sugarcane stem."

Words have sharp edges; be careful what you say.

Lewi eno jiemni.

"Your tongue may bring calamity on you."

A caution to the tactless talker.

Dhogi no jemni.

"Your mouth will put you in problems."

Be careful with your utterances.

Ling' loyo duoko.

"Silence is better than giving a reply."

Not every word spoken to you deserves an answer.

Ling' chiko it en ohala.

"Listening carefully is beneficial."

A good listener learns many new things.

Keto jadiemre.

"Observe carefully, quietly."

At times, think and observe without talking; silence is gold.

Ka idwaro pimo wach maling'ling' to kik ipim ei ot.

"If you want to divulge a secret, do not do it inside a house."

Walls have ears.

Beduru motang' hundhwe ni machiegni.

"Be watchful; the hundhwe (the talking bird) is near."

Nothing said in private is guaranteed secret.

Elo winyo e iro.

"Uncover a bird in a smoky place."

Reveal a secret near a gossip and it spreads like smoke.

Awinjo awinja loyo ng'ama oaye.

"Hearsay claims to know more than the eyewitness."

Rumor is more sensational than truth.

Iro ok dum nono ma onge mach.

"There is no smoke without fire."

A rumor must have a source.

> **Rit iwach kineno.**
>
> "Wait and talk when you have witnessed something."
>
> Be cautious in reporting hearsay.

> **Akuru ok kuodhi e iro.**
>
> "A dove is not backbitten in a smoky place."
>
> Serious and valuable matters are not discussed carelessly in the open.

> **Jabudho e duonde ariyo jabedo jamiriambo.**
>
> "A member of two evening fireside gatherings (two duol clubs) is likely to be a liar."
>
> One cannot serve two masters faithfully; the saying also preserves the duol, the men's evening fireside, as an institution — the storytelling chapter will return to it.

Wealth and Generosity

The old people were not against wealth; they were against the grasping hand and the closed one. These sayings praise the hands that multiply and the hands that give, and they warn the greedy with stories in a single line.

> **Acham ayieng' ne onego suna.**
>
> "'I eat until I am satisfied' killed the mosquito."
>
> Greed kills.

> **Ich lach nonego Okal Tako.**
>
> "Covetousness killed Okal Tako."
>
> Uncontrolled greed may prove fatal.

> **Dhako ema kelo mwandu.**
>
> "It is a wife who creates wealth."
>
> A wife is a harbinger of wealth.

Lwete ber.

"Good hands."

Said of one who knows how to create wealth; whatever he touches multiplies, in livestock and in crops.

Lwete bup.

"His hands are heavy."

He is generous; his hands are heavy with giving.

Chunyi ler ka ndara.

"You are as clean-hearted as the road."

Said of someone generous and welcoming to everyone who passes.

Ero en sombe koso soko.

"It takes away or refills like a well."

Even a well may dry up; use every resource carefully.

Otonglo nonego otondi nyar Seme.

"Ten cents killed Otondi, the girl from Seme."

Love of materialism may cause death.

Dhier kiyombi.

"Poverty cannot be left behind."

Need is never fully escaped; it walks with a person.

Guok ong'iyo kama omuode chogo.

"A dog frequents the place where it gets a bone to chew."

Kindness is paid with kindness.

Adita mipime ema ipimonie.

"The measure you use is the measure used to repay you."

Measure for measure.

Death and God

The last theme is the one that levels all the others. The old people spoke of death without flinching and of God without distance — Tham, Nyasaye, the One who is still with you when everything else has gone.

> **Tho mariwa.**
> "In death all human beings are equal."
> Death is the great equalizer.

> **Dhiang' tho gi lum e dhoge.**
> "A cow dies with grass in its mouth."
> Death allows no time to prepare.

> **Ondamo minyono ema teri kaliel.**
> "Every step you take draws you nearer to your grave."
> Every beginning has an end.

> **Nindo nyamin tho.**
> "Sleep is death's sister."
> In sleep, as in death, one is oblivious to the world.

> **Ich ema ithogo.**
> "It is your stomach with which you die."
> When we die, all we have remains behind except what we have eaten.

> **Bur achiel ok ike ji ariyo.**
> "Two people are not buried in one grave."
> No two people are totally alike; each meets death as himself.

> **Jaote tho ok geng'.**
> "Death's messenger is not stopped."
> No one argues with the summons.

> **Ji ok tho duto.**
>
> "People do not all perish at the same time."
>
> Even in disaster there are survivors.

> **Yie ok neg ji duto.**
>
> "When a boat capsizes, not all its occupants drown."
>
> In most disasters there are survivors — a lake people's hope, and the lake's chapter will return to it.

> **Winyo bende uyo ka aye to piyo.**
>
> "Even a bird flies, and in the end lands somewhere."
>
> Everything has its end.

> **Tham oyieyi.**
>
> "Tham (God) favors you; Tham agrees with you."
>
> Tham is recorded by Odaga as a name for God.

> **Ka Nyasachi pod nitie to kata kingi to kadho akadha.**
>
> "While your God is still with you, even if you are bewitched, the bad magic will not harm you."
>
> A person's life is controlled by his God, his luck or fate, not by another human being. Nyasaye/Nyasachi = God.

Roots, Character, and Leadership

Four more sayings stand at the end of Odaga's gift to this chapter, and the book will not lose them. Two guard a person's roots — the very subject of this whole work. Two guard the leaders who would carry the revival.

> **Chien kiyany.**
>
> "One's background and origin are never insulted."
>
> One's beginning makes one what one is; respect it.

> **Dalau ok rwenyi.**
>
> "You cannot fail to recognize your home."
>
> However far a man travels, home is known on sight.

> **Ruoth ok yiere e kom kende.**
>
> "A chief does not elect himself."
>
> A good leader does not impose himself on the people.

> **Kul ma ruedhi iye roye ok ponie.**
>
> "Calves do not thrive in a cowshed where bulls always fight."
>
> When two leaders fight, those under them suffer most.

These are the fireside statutes. Learn them the way they were meant to be learned: a few at a time, spoken aloud, and used — to chide gently, to answer wisely, to settle a point — the way the elders used them.

Roots to Remember

- Every proverb in this chapter comes from Asenath Odaga's published collection, gathered from named elders, 1976–1982.
- Kogno achiel ok neg onyuogo — "One thumb does not crush a louse" — is Odaga's own picture of riwruok e teko: unity is strength.
- Ngeche were the schoolbooks of the old way: used to chide, to answer, to teach the youth.
- The printed page carries no tone; every proverb must still be learned from a living voice.
- A chief does not elect himself, and calves suffer when bulls fight — the proverbs guarded leaders too.

Chapter 29 — Phrases and Language: The Tongue of the Book

A man cannot teach a heritage in a borrowed tongue alone. This chapter sets down the Dholuo of daily courtesy and of the book's key ideas, exactly as the published sources give it, so that the words can be practiced at the gate, at the table, and at the fireside.

The Language Itself

Dholuo is a Western Nilotic language of the Luo group, spoken around the eastern and southern shores of Nam Lolwe (Lake Victoria) — in Kisumu, Siaya, Homa Bay and Migori counties and into northern Tanzania — by some 4.2 million people (2009 census). It is closely related to Acholi, Alur, Adhola and Lango, and partly mutually intelligible with them. The name itself teaches: dho means "mouth" and by extension "language," so **Dholuo = "the mouth/language of the Luo."**

A note on pronunciation. Dholuo is a tonal language: the rise and fall of the voice can change a word's meaning, and tone also carries grammar. Standard Dholuo spelling writes neither the tone nor the full vowel music of the language — which is why this book insists that every phrase be learned from a living voice, not from the page alone. The spelling uses the Latin alphabet without q, x and z, and with these special pairs: **ch** (as in "church"), **dh** (a soft sound like "th" in "the"), **th** (a hard dental "t," not the English "th"), **ny** (as in "canyon"), **ng'** (the "ng" of "singer"), and **ng** (the "ng" of "finger"). The written tradition is young — its foundations were laid from 1907, with early grammars by Carscallen (1910) and others — which is precisely why the elders' spoken word remains the senior authority.

Greetings and Courtesies (Mosruok)

These greetings and courtesies are documented in Peter Onyango Onyoyo's Dholuo Grammar for Beginners (University of Nairobi), supplemented by the Omniglot Dholuo phrase page and by Odaga.

Morning. Oyawore — literally "it [the sky] has opened itself." To several people: Oyaworeuru. The reply: Oyawore ahinya, "very much so." Or ask: Ichiyo nade? — "How is your morning?" — and hear Achiyo ma ber, "my morning is good."

General and midday. Misawa — the formal hello. To several: Misawauru. Reply: Misawa ahinya. Informal: Ber — reply Ber ahinya.

Evening. Oyimore. To several: Oyimoreuru.

Night and parting. Oriti — from rito, "to protect": literally "May He protect you," "May God protect you." To say goodbye is goyo oriti. The word branches beautifully: Oriti inind maber (sleep well), Oriti idhi maber / iwuoth maber (go well; safe journey), Oriti idong' maber (stay well). Other partings: Wabironenore (we shall see each other) and Wanere kiny (see you tomorrow).

Asking and thanking. "How are you?" — Idhi nade? / Intie nade? The reply: Adhi maber — "I am well." "Thank you" — Erokamano; Odaga herself closes her acknowledgments with EROKAMANO MADUONG' — thank you very much. "Sorry, pardon" — Mos; mos ahinya, very sorry. "Welcome" — Ajolo in (to one person), Ajolo wu (to several). And the small change of daily kindness: Nyasaye ogwedhi (God bless you); Amor neni (I am happy to see you); Nyingi ng'a? (What is your name? — answer: Nyinga en…, "my name is…"); In jakanye? (Where do you come from?); Adwaro pi (I want water); tich maber (good work); ee (yes).

Words for the Book's Key Concepts

dala — the homestead; also pacho. A man's homesteads collectively are delni. **wuon dala** — the head of the homestead. **jodongo** — the elders (singular **jaduong'**, an elder, a big person, also the respectful word for grandfather). **riwruok** — unity, togetherness, joining together; riwruok e teko, "unity is strength." **konyir** — the communal work-party: neighbors called to work together on one person's need and fed by the host. **jalupo** (plural **jo-lupo**) — a fisherman, the fishing people; **chike-lupo**, the clan rules of fishing. **jachwech** — the moulder, the maker: used of the potter, and of God as Creator; Odaga's proverb Jachwech chiemo e tago — "A potter eats in a potsherd" — waits for us in the crafts chapter. **jathieth** — "one who treats," the traditional healer. Let the book be plain here, because the word is often confused: jathieth is the healer, **not** the blacksmith. **jagam** — the marriage go-between; Odaga: Jagam dhoge ariyo — "A go-between is double-mouthed," for he must try to please both families. **duol** (also written abila for the hearth) — the men's evening fireside gathering place where instruction and judgment happened.

Kinship Words

Kinship was the map a child learned first. **kwaro / kwara** — grandfather ("Kwara gi jaode" — "my grandfather and his wife" — is Odaga's riddle for the sun and the moon). **dani** — grandmother. **pim** — the elderly woman, the grandmother figure who was the master storyteller. **owadgi / owadu** — one's brother, your brother. **nyathi** — a child. **wat** — kin, a relative: Wat en wat — "Kinship is kinship," binding

and lasting; Osiep tho to wat osiko — "Friendship cools off and dies, but kinship is forever." **yuoro** — an in-law: Yuoro lau kwach — "An in-law is a leopard skin," for certain relationships are held very special. **mikayi, nyachira, reru** — first, second and third wife, in order.

One honesty belongs in this chapter. The everyday modern words baba (father) and mama (mother) are on every tongue in Homa Bay today, but they were not verified against a published Dholuo source in the research behind this book, so they are flagged here rather than asserted — an elder, or Edwin's own ear, will confirm them in a moment. In the meantime Odaga gives the book one fully sourced mother-saying: Meru en meru — "Your mother is your mother."

Counting and Time: What Could Be Sourced

A complete published counting list was not secured in this research, and this book will not invent one. What is attested inside Odaga's published texts may be printed on that basis: **achiel** (one), **ariyo** (two), **adek** (three — "kombe adek," the three chairs), **abich** (five — "Jodongo abich," the five old men of the riddle, the fingers taking kuon). Time words attested the same way: **odiechieng'** (daytime), **gotieno** (at night), **kiny** (tomorrow — Wanere kiny). The full number system, and the old words for seasons and market days, are an elders' question — and a fine one for a first visit.

Roots to Remember

- Dholuo means "the mouth/language of the Luo" — dho is mouth, and language.
- Oriti, the goodbye, means "May God protect you" — even parting was a blessing.
- Jathieth is the healer, "one who treats" — not the blacksmith.
- The written language is young (from 1907); the elders' spoken word remains the senior authority.
- What print could not verify — the full counting system — is left, honestly, as an elders' question.

Chapter 30 — Sigendini: The Evening School of Stories

Before there were classrooms in Nyangweso, there was a school that met every night, charged no fees, and never closed for holidays. Its name was sigendini — the storytelling — and this chapter is its memorial and, God willing, its reopening notice.

Where, Who, and How

Storytelling lived in the **siwindhe**, the grandmother's house, where the girls slept and were taught; the boys slept in the simba and took their instruction at the grandfather's duol fireside. Odaga's own gloss on the proverb Iming' ka mane ok oninde siwindhe — "as ignorant as a person who never slept in the siwindhe" — is the strongest single witness: the siwindhe was where the young were taught "Luo traditions and cultural values, including storytelling, social ethics, sex education." A Maseno University thesis on Luo story-songs, built on 110 story-songs collected in Siaya and Kisumu East, found that the principal tellers were elderly, post-menopause women — the **Pim** — and records soberly that "the traditional setting of storytelling is now almost extinct." That sentence is one of the reasons this book exists.

Odaga gives the tale-types their names: stories are **sigendini** (singular sigana), and the proverbs themselves remember the repertoire — Sigand nyambura gi oyieyo, "the story of the cat and the rat," used to name bitter enmity, and the tale of the spider and the hare, cited by Odaga as the picture of a deceptive friendship. The great named tales — Luanda Magere, Gor Mahia, Nyamgondho wuod Ombare, Simbi Nyaima — are told in their own parts of this book; Odaga, who also published Simbi Nyaima gi Sigendini Luo Moko ("Simbi Nyaima and Other Luo Tales"), preserves the proverb Nituo ka Nyamgondho wuod Ombare, showing how a tale becomes a byword on every tongue.

The Trickster Hare

The hare, **Apuoyo**, is the small clever one of Luo tale and proverb, and Odaga's collection lets the book present him entirely from published text:

> **Apuoyo nindo to neno.**
>
> "The hare sleeps with its eyes open."
>
> Always alert.

> **Apuoyo tin to go rude.**
> "Although small, the hare produces twins."
> Size does not limit ability.

> **Apuoyo tho e gonde.**
> "The hare dies in its lair."
> In attack, one runs home to safety.

> **Apuoyo ok tony e oro ariyo.**
> "The hare does not escape the snare in two consecutive droughts."
> A thief's days are numbered.

And the race itself lives in the work proverbs of Chapter 28: Kinda ne omiyo opuk oyombo apuoyo — "Perseverance made the tortoise beat the hare." The children who heard Apuoyo's tricks at the fireside were learning judgment with their laughter: cleverness is admired, and cleverness is warned against, in the same tale.

Riddles (Ngero)

Odaga's Riddles section explains the form: riddles lack the seriousness of proverbs; children used them as a game, for entertainment and general education; they promote quick thinking and sharpen the wit. A session opens with an exchange of calls between the contender and the audience — but honesty requires a note: the archive scan's text of those call-and-response words is garbled, and they must be verified from a living voice before they are taught. The riddles themselves came through cleanly, and here they are, exactly as published:

> **Abet e kombe adek kinde duto.**
> "I always sit on three chairs."
> Answer: a cooking pot resting on three stones.

> **Kombe adek ma ka achiel onge to ariyo modong' ok ti.**
> "Three chairs; if one is missing, the other two cannot work."
> Answer: the three cooking stones.

Abila ei bur moluor gi kudho.

"A hut in a hole surrounded by thorns."

Answer: the tongue in the mouth, surrounded by teeth.

Agoyo nyathina to ji miel.

"I beat my child while people are dancing."

Answer: the drum.

Jodongo abich ma idho wi got.

"Five old men climbing a hill."

Answer: the fingers and thumb taking stiff porridge.

Kwara gi jaode.

"My grandfather and his wife."

Answer: the sun and the moon.

Kwara miel kende.

"My grandfather is dancing alone."

Answer: the tin lamp.

Oda ma onge dhot.

"My house which is doorless."

Answer: an egg.

Owuok e dala duk to oduogo korwako nanga.

"It leaves the home naked, but comes back wearing clothes."

Answer: maize — the seed goes out bare and returns in its husk; a riddle that itself dates the maize era, as the table chapter will show.

Nyara ma lando obet mos ewi dak.

"My fair-skinned daughter sits quietly on the storage pot."

Answer: the milk churning gourd.

> **Dapi mapong' gi pi ma dhoge ochimo piny to ok oko.**
> "A pot full of water with its mouth facing down, yet the water does not run out."
> Answer: a cow's udder.

> **Gima ka imakogo osiep to nyaka goyi piny.**
> "If you make friends with it, it must knock you down."
> Answer: beer.

> **Agulu ma ok luok iye.**
> "A pot whose inside is never washed."
> Answer: the stomach.

> **Anyalo ringo matek to aonge tiendena.**
> "I can run fast, but I have no legs."
> Answer: a river.

> **Oyaro rang'ede.**
> "The wide one made of ribs."
> Answer: the winnowing basket.

Tongue Twisters and a Children's Song

Odaga records weche mawacho tek, tongue twisters, at which children competed, the old ones passed down by word of mouth: "Rawo luor liel, liel luor rawo" and "Ji dhi chamo ng'op omoth omoth, ng'op omoth omoth ogore piny." Try them slowly, then at speed, and you will hear the fireside laughing. And she preserves the **Oyundi (titmouse) song**, a call-and-response in which the little bird is told in turn to fetch water, work the field, grind grain and cook — each time answering "my leg is hurting" — but when told to come and eat, the titmouse runs. It is a laziness lesson small children laughed at and never forgot: the fireside taught through play.

How Stories Carried Law and Values

Three mechanisms are visible in the sources. First, **placement**: teaching happened in fixed institutions — siwindhe for the girls, duol for the boys and men

— night after night, year after year; the curriculum was the tales, the proverbs and the riddles, and the teachers were the grandparents. Second, **the proverb as verdict**: Odaga's closing essay shows ngeche being used to chide, to answer, to settle a point — a proverb quoted by an elder in a dispute was not decoration but authority, the community's memory speaking in one line. Third, **the oath in speech**: Odaga preserves Ng'ado guok — "to cut a dog in two," to take a binding oath to keep peace, usually between warring factions — and Ting'o mbira, to take an oath which, if false, may lead to death. The word bound, and everyone knew it bound. When the missions and the colonial state displaced the siwindhe and the duol, it was this whole school that closed — which is why its reopening, in whatever modern vessel, is the heart of the Roots work.

Roots to Remember

- The siwindhe and the duol were the evening school: grandmothers taught the girls, grandfathers the boys, night after night.
- The principal storytellers were the Pim — elderly women, the masters of the tale.
- Apuoyo the hare taught judgment through laughter: cleverness admired and warned against in the same story.
- Riddles sharpened the wit; the riddle about maize "coming back wearing clothes" itself dates the maize era.
- A proverb quoted by an elder was a verdict, and an oath bound like a chain — the word carried law.

Chapter 31 — Music and Dance: The Sound of the People

If the proverbs were the people's book, music was their voice at full strength. This chapter follows the sound: the great lyre, the horns and drums of the funeral, the dances of the beer party and the burial ground — and the hard century in which the drum was banned in the homestead and answered by conquering the nation's popular music.

The Nyatiti and the Thum Tradition

The **nyatiti** is the classical instrument of the Luo: a bowl lyre of five to eight strings (eight in the standard form), its body carved from a single piece of wood, the resonator covered with cowhide, the strings once made of cow tendon and sinew and now of nylon fishing line. The player — the **jathum** — holds it flush against his chest and stomach, seated on a low stool called **orindi** (also then in Siaya, mbero in South Nyanza), plucking with both hands while he sings, and keeping rhythm with **gara**, iron bells on his right ankle, and the **oduong'o**, a metal toe ring struck against the base of the instrument. Masters of the nyatiti were honored as keepers of oral history, and the praise poetry woven into performance — **pakruok**, improvised praise — is one of the great carriers of the Dholuo language through time.



A nyatiti player in 1936 — the classical instrument of the Luo, in the hands of a master. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



The instrument itself: a twentieth-century Luo nyatiti from Nyanza, now held at the Musical Instrument Museum, Phoenix. Photo: Terry Ballard via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0).

The customs around the instrument are as documented as its parts. Traditionally the nyatiti was men's only — it was taboo for a woman even to hold it. A father did not teach his own son directly, lest the son outshine him; a learner went to live with a master, and when the father retired he handed over his gara and oduong'o, and the son became jathum. The instrument served births, weddings and healing, and above all funerals, where the **sigweya** — the declamatory mourning chant extolling the deceased — belongs to the nyatiti's world. A smaller lyre, the **nyagwero**, was used by healers in cleansing and in reintegrating an offender into the community. Pan African Music records the string symbolism: the lower four strings stand for the first four days after a man's birth, the upper four for the first four days after his death — the whole of life, held in two hands.

In the twentieth century Ayub Ogada (Job Seda), self-taught at the Bomas of Kenya, carried the nyatiti to the world stage; and in the 1950s the nyatiti's plucked patterns became the template that Luo guitarists turned into **benga** — the tradition did not die, it changed instruments. The wider thum tradition likewise absorbed the **orutu** (the one-stringed fiddle), the **onanda** (accordion) and the **gita** (guitar), raising their players to jathum standing. Odaga's proverbs keep the instruments in the language itself: Ng'ama nitie ema thum wero — "It is the one who is present whose praise is sung with the thum (harp)" — and Liech ong'iyo gi oporo — "An elephant is used to the oporo," the **oporo** being a wind instrument made from a cow's horn, in Odaga's own note. And the dancer is in the language too: Ng'ama miel mamit ema iting'o bade — "The one who dances best has his arm lifted in appreciation."



The tradition carried today: a living nyatiti player with his instrument. Photo: Artbeatmusicke via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Horns, Drums, and the Funeral Ensemble

The **tung'** is the Luo horn, heard in the Ramogi dance (below) and in the funeral drama. A scholarly study of Dholuo dirges (2016), citing Shino's Death and Rituals Among the Luo in South Nyanza (1997), describes **tero buru** as a dance-drama combining acting, music, spoken dialogue, mime, solo chants (**gweyo**), self-praise (**pakruok**), dance and the dramatic chasing of evil spirits, "accompanied by musical instruments such as **bul** (drum), **frimbi**, **tung'** and **oporo**." The same study maps the funeral's music in sequence: the death announcement (**golo ywak**), the vigil (**budho** — relatives stay in the compound through the nights until burial, singing dirges and chanting to stay awake), the grave digging (**kunyo**), the burial (**iko**), and after a week of eating and sleeping in the compound, **tero buru matin**, accompanying the spirit of the deceased to the former battleground. Music at a Luo funeral was never entertainment; its documented functions were to praise the departed, console the bereaved, keep the watchers awake and express pain.



Luo musicians performing traditional songs at night — drums, shakers and voices, as the evening gatherings have always sounded. Photo: Timlamec via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).



An abuu, the great Luo trumpet, at the Nairobi National Museum. Published description of this instrument is thin, and this book will not invent what the record does not give. Photo: Bärbel Miemietz via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

The Dances

Ramogi. The **Ramogi Dancers of Homa Bay County** — the Kagan Kochia Traditional Dancers of Rangwe Sub-County, founded 1965 and led by Alfred Anyango Migure — were documented by the Singing Wells project (recorded at Homa Bay, 30 November 2011) and featured at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2014. The dance is named for **Ramogi, the patriarch of the Luo people**; for hundreds of years groups of mature men have performed it to beseech his spirit to possess them, and it was traditionally performed during burial ceremonies (tero buru), though today it is also danced at weddings, state functions and Independence Day. The costume is a text in itself: an ostrich-feather headdress (the ostrich stands for beauty and courage), movements imitating the ostrich and the crested crane taking off and circling, the **orengo** flywhisk of buffalo tail — traditionally a symbol of elders, used by the choreographer as a visual cue — a black-and-white colobus monkey pelt worn on the back, and **gar**, ankle shakers, called "the salt of the dance." Accompaniment includes drumming and the tung' horn.

> **The People's Story**
>
> The Ramogi dance takes its name, the people say, from Ramogi Ajwang' — the first-wave migration leader who settled Ramogi Hill in the histories told elsewhere in this book. The dance itself and the patriarch are documented; the joining of the two names is the community's own account, carried by the dancers of Homa Bay themselves, and it is honored here as the people's story.



A Luo dancer in the great ostrich-feather headdress, spear in hand, at the Eldoret Agricultural Show — regalia of the dance in the mid-twentieth century. Photo: Tropenmuseum collection via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Dodo / dudu. The beer-party dance. Kenyan curriculum sources list music at beer parties as "dudu, ohangla dance," and the Kenyatta University Department of Music and Dance repertoire table lists **Dodo** as a Luo (female) dance and Ramogi as the Luo male dance; the Smithsonian's 2014 Kenya pages describe the artist Makadem's fusion as combining ohangla, nyatiti and **dodo, a traditional Luo singing style**. The sources vary between calling dodo a dance and a singing style — this book presents it as the beer-party song-dance and leaves the local form for the elders to settle.

Ohangla. A scholarly paper on the traditional ohangla dance music of the Luo records the debate on its origin: Akumu (2004) concludes that today's ohangla is a contemporary genre whose traditional forerunner was a Luo drum music called **Kalapapla**. Traditional ohangla was an ensemble of eight drums beaten with sticks plus a cylindrical shoulder-slung drum, accompanied by flute, nyatiti or kinanda, at a very fast tempo, used at weddings and at funerals within tero buru. Its original lyrics carried adult messages, and local elders banned ohangla in the early 1980s; children and teenagers were not allowed. Its named modern masters — Tony Nyadundo, Osogo Winyo, Onyi Papa Jey — belong to the revival. Beside these stands **Olengo**, the wrestling match, with its own music, listed among

music's occasions alongside funerals, beer parties, welcoming warriors home and courtship.

Sigalagala — a correction this book makes gladly. Sigalagala is **not a dance**. It is the unique **ululation, mainly by women, that marks the climax of a musical performance** — as the dirges study describes the vigil: "they dance, solo chant in self praise and praise the ancestors, and women dance and ululate (sigalagala)." Wherever the word has been written down as a funeral dance, let it be corrected to this. And note **pakruok as structure**: mid-performance, the singing stops, the instruments drop in pitch, the dance eases, and an individual takes up self-praise before the music rises again. Praise was built into the architecture of the performance, not added to it.

What the Missions Banned, and What Survived

A University of Nairobi thesis on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Homa Bay District (2001) is the most direct local witness. The SDA reached Kenya in 1906 — Gendia, in what is now Homa Bay County, was among its first stations — and the thesis finds that the Sabbath school program "played a significant role in the disintegration of Luo cultural practices by condemning such customary aspects as initiation, widow inheritance, polygamy, dietary prohibitions and practice of magic." The missionaries, it says, "did not study Luo culture" and "required the Luo to abandon some of their customs and practices and adopt western ideas and practices"; drinking alcohol, smoking bhang, initiation rites and consulting traditional medicine men were to be abandoned. It quotes Tom Mboya: "In the early days the church objected to the African dances as primitive and uncivilized, and for years there was complete conflict between the church and those Africans who wanted to continue African customs and stood for African culture." Converts were pressed to forsake "instruments such as the drums, orutu, etc., dances like 'Dudu'" as outdated and satanic. At the colonial level, a 1952 House of Commons exchange confirms the two hands of suppression: tribal dancing was "controlled under byelaws," while missionary societies advised their followers against dances "held to be incompatible with the Christian faith."

What survived did so by changing vessels: the nyatiti's patterns passed into benga guitar; ohangla outlived its own elders' ban and returned as a modern genre with traditional bones; the Ramogi dance moved from the funeral ground to the cultural troupe and the national stage, carrying Homa Bay's own Kagan Kochia name with it; and the dirge and praise forms lived on inside the funeral customs the churches could not wholly replace. The book should say plainly what the record shows: the missions suppressed the drum in the homestead, and the drum answered by becoming the sound of Luo popular music itself.

Roots to Remember

- The nyatiti's eight strings carry a whole life: four for the first days after birth, four for the first days after death.
- Sigalagala is the women's ululation at a performance's climax — not a dance; let the record be corrected wherever it says otherwise.
- The Ramogi dance is Homa Bay's own — the Kagan Kochia troupe of Rangwe, founded 1965, carried it to the Smithsonian.
- Ohangla's traditional forerunner was Kalapapla; the elders banned ohangla itself in the early 1980s, and it returned.
- The drum was suppressed in the homestead — and answered by becoming benga, the sound of Luo popular music.

Chapter 32 — Dress and Adornment: What the Body Wore

Dress was never vanity in the old dala; it was information. A glance told you a person's age, standing, clan wealth and occasion. This chapter reads that language from its finest dated witness — the photographs — and follows it through the great change to cloth.

The Old Dress, from the Photographs

The Pitt Rivers Museum's Luo Visual History — some 350 photographs from 1902 to 1936, assembled with named Luo research collaborators — preserves the Dholuo words in its captions. A 1936 Evans-Pritchard portrait (Alego Uyoma) shows a man "clean shaved using an iron blade (**nyamarich**) except a small patch on top center of his head," wearing "an ostrich eggshell necklace (**rek**) and glass bead earrings of the type worn by men (**ngaga**). His clothing is simply of animal (cow?) skin (**pien**), which was a common Luo attire." A Hobley photograph of about 1902 shows young men and an elder: "The waist skin aprons and armlets (**minyonge**) and leg rings are typical of those worn in the period, and they also wear hippo or wild pig tusk ornaments, a monkey tail headdress and each carries a club." And a Hobley photograph of 1902 shows Luo women near Kisumu "wearing numerous body ornaments, such as metal leg rings, anklets and armlets (minyonge), bead necklaces (**tik ng'ut**), waist beads (**tik nungo**) and cowrie shell (**gaagi**) necklaces. They also wear different kinds of aprons (**oleme**). One woman seems to have an ostrich egg shell waist bead (rek). Small woven baskets for daily use are carried together with walking sticks."

Odaga explains the **rek** from the inside: a waist band of discs cut from ostrich eggshell, about half an inch across, strung and worn around the waist — her proverb Onyorore reg radeny, "as closely spaced as the waist beads of radeny," assumes every hearer knows it. Brass appears in her simile Maleny ka mula — "that which sparkles like brass," said of something well polished and well kept. The leopard skin was the prestige hide: Yuoro lau kwach, "an in-law is a leopard skin" — the relationship, like the skin, is rare and honored. Let the documented word stand plainly in this book: the Dholuo word for skin clothing in the published record is **pien**.

The Change to Cloth

The Pitt Rivers exhibition page "Changing Body Adornment" dates the turn precisely: "By the time Evans-Pritchard visited Luoland in 1936, many people did

not wear traditional ornaments, favouring European-style clothing." The new dress even made new words: those who fully embraced the new education and clothing were called "civilized" (**lony** or **nanga**), or a man "of good dressing" (**jananga**), or "a clever or educated man" (**odiero**). Women and girls wore printed cloth dresses, head coverings and shoes; the museum shows a woman with a cloth headdress (**kitamba**). And the record is honest about mixture, not replacement: Osori of the Kato clan photographed in a traditional Luo headdress together with western clothing; an elder in a traditional headdress with an expensive western cloth robe. Cohen and Odhiambo's Siaya (1989) gives the same blending a food-word: maize meal itself was called kuon jonango, "the ugali of the clothed people" — cloth and the new grain arrived as one package, the dress of the school and the mission.

The **leso/khanga** printed cloths and the loose **dera** dress became the everyday wear of Luo women across the later twentieth century, and **kitenge** the cloth of ceremony and pride today — the well-known general pattern for western Kenya. Luo-specific published detail on that transition is thin in the research behind this book, so its fine points — when the leso reached South Nyanza homes, what the churches required of women's dress — are left among the elders' questions rather than asserted here. What can be printed as documented is the frame: skins and beads first; printed cloth and the kitamba by the 1930s; mixture as the norm; and traditional regalia — ostrich feathers, skins, flywhisks — preserved into the present as ceremonial dress, exactly as the Ramogi dancers wear it.



Traditional dress and ornament kept alive at the Rusinga Island cultural festival — the old language of the body, still spoken. Photo: Jeffmugendi via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

What a Museum Visitor Can Still See

Kisumu Museum (National Museums of Kenya; opened 1980) holds the region's material memory. Its centerpiece since 2005 is the **Ber gi dala** exhibition — "It is good to have a home" — a full-size traditional Luo homestead built with UNESCO and Belgian government support and with the local community: the homestead head's house, the houses of his three wives and of his eldest son, granaries and livestock corrals, with cattle and sheep pens, fish-smoking kilns, and interpretation in Luo and English covering the origins and migration of the Luo, healing plants, and the establishing of a new home. The exhibition's objects, as catalogued in the scholarly account of it, include "pottery, hides and skins, grinding stones, three-legged stools, fish traps, bird traps, axes, and hoes," and the wider galleries display fishing gear, musical instruments, weaponry and beadwork. For Edwin's team, Ber gi dala is the one field trip this book prescribes: nearly every object named in this part of the book stands there, labeled, an hour from home. Copies of the Pitt Rivers Luo photographs are also deposited at Kisumu Museum — the 1902–1936 faces of this chapter can be viewed there in person.

Roots to Remember

- Pien is the documented word for skin clothing; rek is the ostrich-eggshell waist band, disc by disc.
- Adornment spoke: minyonge rings, tik ng'ut necklaces, gaagi cowries told age, standing and occasion at a glance.
- By 1936 cloth had largely replaced skins — but mixture, not replacement, is the honest picture.
- The new dress made new words: jananga, a man of good dressing; odiero, a clever, educated man.
- Ber gi dala at Kisumu Museum holds the whole material world of this part in one homestead — go and see it.

Chapter 33 — The Table: Kuon, the Grains, and the Law of Sharing

Every root in this book eventually reaches a table. What was cooked, in what order it was served, and who was fed first — these were not housekeeping details. They were the constitution, eaten daily. This chapter sets the table of the old way: the grains, the greens, the feasts, the brew — and the law that governed them all.

Kuon and Its Grains: Sorghum and Millet First

The most important dish among the Luo was and is **kuon** — ugali in Kiswahili, a stiff porridge of flour stirred into boiling water — but the flour was not always maize. The traditional range, as the Macleki essay "From the Cooking Pot to the Table" records it, ran to sorghum, cassava, or maize meal, or blends of sorghum and cassava, or of all three. A 1926 observer, Callanan, gives the oldest menu in this chapter: "Kuon: a doughy substance prepared by boiling mtama (sorghum) flour or flour of finger millet (kal) in water until a doughy substance was formed — eaten with meat or native vegetables, buttermilk (buyo), blood, fish, chicken or eggs," adding that wimbi (finger millet) "was chiefly consumed by the Luo near the Kisii border," and that nyoyo, beans and maize mixed, was less frequent then. The everyday drink-porridge was **nyuka**, of millet, maize, or mixed millet-sorghum-cassava flour, served at breakfast or any time. Women's work stood behind every meal: "grinding sorghum or millet on grinding stones, cooking the food, and serving it" — and Odaga's Mbaka nyapong' gi dero (Chapter 28) preserves the grinding stone and the granary in their contest. Millet seed itself was preserved with wood ash — Morumo ka bend aburu, "as finished as millet preserved with wood ash": when the ash-kept millet is done, only ash remains.

The Maize Transition

Maize is not an indigenous crop, and its conquest of the Luo table is dated and documented. Mango and Hebinck's study of maize in Luoland records that maize "appeared in the Luo landscape at the end of the 19th century" and "quickly became incorporated in people's lives," its seed becoming family seed — koth dala. Both colonial records and oral history ascribe the gradual shift from sorghum and millet to a series of famines in the late 19th and early 20th century. Improved white maize was distributed during World War I; "by 1930, maize was well established in West Kenya." The statistics carry the shock of the change for Nyanza: maize production rose from 469 tonnes in 1909 to 5,689 tonnes in 1918, while millet and sorghum fell from 1,770 tonnes to 19 tonnes in the same years.

Cohen and Odhiambo's Siaya (1989) preserves what people called the newcomer: maize meal was first **kuon ongere**, "the white man's ugali," and, as the schooled elite adopted it, **kuon jonango**, "the ugali of the 'clothed' people." The riddle in Chapter 30 — the seed that "leaves the home naked but comes back wearing clothes" — shows maize fully naturalized into the fireside repertoire. And the story is not simple loss: Luo farmers kept their own open-pollinated "local" maize landraces in cultivation through every hybrid campaign of the Green Revolution era, and sorghum kuon is still made in Nyanza households today. The documented line, and this book's line, is this: **the stiff porridge is centuries older than maize; sorghum and finger millet are the original grains of kuon; maize arrived with famine relief, colonial pressure and the prestige of the school, and within a generation it had taken the granary.**

Greens, Dishes, and the Lake's Gifts

The traditional vegetables named in the sources are **alot, dek, apoth, mito** and **osuga**; a University of Nairobi thesis on foodways in Rarieda Sub-County, in Siaya, names **Atipa, Dek, Mitoo, Boo** and **Osuga**, with the verdict that kuon "is the culturally acceptable food for the Luo people and anything else is considered a snack." Odaga adds the table's philosophy in a proverb: Alot michayo ema tieko kuon — "The despised vegetable is what finishes the kuon" — never judge a thing by face value; the underdog has his use. **Nyoyo** — boiled maize and beans — was eaten as a snack. White ants were a delicacy: Ng'wen ok bodh e wang' bur — "White ants are not eaten right at the entrance to their nest" — Odaga notes dried fried white ants are a Luo delicacy; the proverb teaches careful handling of a valuable source. Fish came with its own preparations: the Luo used broken pieces of pot, **balatago**, to deep-fry fish with milk cream — **mo bora**, called **mo moleny** when cooked. Cooked blood was food, eaten with a shell for a spoon: Sare gi remo — "As compatible as cooked blood and the shell."

From the lake (the catching is the next chapter's subject): **ngege** (tilapia) was the most popular fish, with **mumi** (catfish) and **omena**, the small sardine-like fish. Omena's modern night fishery, drawn by lamps, is a recent development; the Nile perch, **mbuta**, is an introduced species whose arrival was a colonial-era decision. Fish smoking — the kilns stand in the Ber gi dala exhibition — was the preservation craft of the shore, and drying and smoking remain women's work in the trade.

Meat, Feasts, and the Goat

Meat was feast food, and the feast calendar is documented: "There was the 'Blessing Feast' and the 'Harvest Feast,' which were held in October and December each year respectively. Both feasts involved slaughtering animals and brewing sorghum beer" (Macleki, citing Pascal, 2012). The division of the slaughtered animal followed rank, and one rule is proverb-documented: **the tongue of a slaughtered animal is always for the old men** — Odaga's Geno lep Nyakeno (Chapter 28) turns on a wife who ate what was the old men's by right. The goat stands in the printed record more quietly: the churning gourd "used for goat's milk" in Odaga's Ochululu ko diel shows goats milked as well as kept for meat, and De nyuok — "strangle a he-goat" — shows the he-goat as the byword for stubborn endurance. The detailed division of a slaughtered goat or cow, portion by portion and rank by rank, is set down in this book as an elders' question rather than reconstructed here.

> **The People's Story**
>
> The goat's full ceremonial economy — the feast animal of first resort, the beast of bridewealth and of cleansing — is carried in the community's own telling, and every elder in Nyangweso can recite its place at the feast. The printed documentation behind this book is thin on the detail, so the book honors the goat's role as the people's story, and leaves the portion-by-portion division of the slaughtered animal for the elders to dictate into the record themselves.

Milk and Cattle Foods

Milk was food, drink and relish: kuon was eaten with **buyo**, buttermilk, and with sour milk among its documented accompaniments. The churning gourd is in the riddles — "my fair-skinned daughter sitting quietly on the storage pot" is the ko mar puoyo chak, the milk churning gourd — and the Rarieda thesis glossary records **Da kol**, the huge pot or gourd in which milk was kept. Blood, drawn and cooked, completed the cattle triad of milk, blood and meat.

Busaa, and the Chang'aa Problem Stated Plainly

Busaa, the traditional brew, was made from maize and sorghum flour, "fermented for four days and drunk out of straws called **oseke**" from the shared pot. Odaga preserves the brewer's sign: Buoyo e kong'o — "Broth is beer": when the broth appears on the brewing pot, the beer is ready. And the riddle warns with a grin: "If

you make friends with it, it must knock you down" — beer. Busaa belonged to ceremony and fellowship: it was brewed for the Blessing and Harvest feasts, and the beer party — with its dudu and ohangla dancing — was one of the documented occasions of Luo music. Who brewed, who might drink, and what rules governed the pot are details this book takes from the elders, for the Luo-specific published sourcing is thin.

Against busaa stands the later problem, stated factually. The twentieth century brought distilled spirits — **chang'aa** — and the Rarieda foodways thesis lists among local brews "Simba wa rangi," a cheap local alcoholic brew, beside busaa in its glossary. Unlike the low-alcohol, food-based, communally governed busaa, unregulated distillation in Kenya has repeatedly been linked to poisoning and death from adulterated liquor — a documented national pattern, not a Luo peculiarity. The missions condemned all alcohol alike; the community's own older distinction — a brew that belonged to feasts and elders' fellowship versus a spirit that answers to no one — is the distinction the elders should be asked to articulate for the record.

The Law of the Table: Who Eats, and in What Order

Sharing was not custom but law, and the proverbs are its statutes:

> **Jarawo owaro wi kuon.**
>
> The jarawo, the man who calls at a home at mealtime, is fed from a portion of everyone's food.
>
> The stranger at the gate at the hour of kuon eats. (Odaga no. 277.)

> **Cham gi wadu.**
>
> "Eat with your brother."
>
> The first rule of the table is that it is shared.

> **Chiem kiparo jodala.**
>
> "When you eat, remember the people at home."
>
> Eating carries the absent with it; food is sent, saved and spoken of toward home.

> **Wendo bade boyo.**
>
> "A guest has long arms."
>
> A guest is allowed privileges denied to those of the home.

Wendo ber gariyo.

"A visitor is welcome for two days."

The other side of the law: hospitality is real, and it has its measure; the overstaying guest outlives it.

Wendo pi mopong'.

"A visitor is like floods."

Welcomed and cared for, and, like floods, present only a few days.

Rangach kikun.

"The gate does not hold grudges and would not deny anybody entry."

Ostracism is decided by people, never by the gate.

Rangach noruoaki.

"The gate will welcome you."

The gate, like life, welcomes everyone.

Ng'ama odenyo ok mosi.

"A hungry person is not greeted."

Feed first; greetings after. A hungry person may not respond, being tired, hungry and angry.

Osiep maber loyo chiemo.

"Genuine friendship is better than food."

Relationship outranks the meal itself.

Within the house, rank was served: the old men received the tongue; children did not sit on the stools of the elders' meeting; and the errand-running child was the fed child — Nyathi mioro ema yieng', "A child who is sent on errands is the one who gets satisfied with food": who supports and cooperates with others receives the same in return. The table taught the whole social order at every meal.

Roots to Remember

- Kuon is centuries older than maize: sorghum and finger millet are its original grains.
- The stranger at the gate at mealtime eats — Jarawo owaro wi kuon is law, not politeness.
- Hospitality had a measure too: a visitor is welcome for two days, and a guest has long arms.
- Feed first, greet after: a hungry person is not greeted.
- Busaa belonged to feasts and fellowship under communal rule; the unregulated spirit that answers to no one is a later, different thing.

Chapter 34 — The Lake's Law: Fishing Traditions

Nam Lolwe was never a warehouse to be emptied. To the fishing people, the **jo-lupo**, the lake was a governed and sacred commons, with rules older than any government — rules with a name of their own: **chike-lupo**, the clan rules of fishing. Paul Opondo's chapter on Luo fishing in Conservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage in Kenya (UCL Press) is the anchor source for this chapter, deepened by the Macleki essay "Fishing at Dunga Beach on Lake Victoria."

The Rules (Chike-Lupo)

The jo-lupo "had developed clan-based rules for fishing (chike-lupo) that had to be observed by all fishers" — rules governing "the use of nets, hooks, baits and canoes." In the pre-colonial era "the mesh size and catch of traditional papyrus nets were carefully controlled so that only a certain number of particular fish species were allowed to be caught." Clan elders controlled access to the lake itself. Let that stand as the headline: generations before the word "conservation" arrived, the lake's people were already practicing it, under their own law, enforced by their own elders.



Fishing on Lake Victoria at Rusinga Island — the working shore the lake's law governed. Photo: Ryan Harvey via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0).

The Closed Season: Two Forms, Kept Distinct

The elders enforced a closed season: "a period when elders decreed that there would be no fishing along the beach, [which] coincided with the season from February to June when fishers would turn to crop farming." During the closed season, "canoes were forbidden to go beyond a certain distance on the lake." This book keeps two dated forms distinct, because they are often merged into one and the merging falsifies both. The traditional decree — February to June in the account above — was the elders' own law, turning men to the fields while the fish bred. The state closed season came later: the colonial government, from the 1950s, "halted the 'free access' system hitherto used by Luo fishers" and imposed its own restrictions — April to August in the modern regulation Opondo records — a policy the post-colonial government maintained from 1963, today administered with Beach Management Units on each beach.

Belief as Enforcement

Conservation "took religious overtones. Fishing was not just a practical activity; it was religious. Fishermen were required to observe certain religious decrees to ensure success during fishing excursions." The named fisherman Oracho Wire testifies in the Dunga Beach essay that fishing and religion were connected. Opondo records the pollution rule of thumb: "The Luo fishers believed that soaps and lemons polluted the rivers, damaging the ecosystem and ultimately killing fish." A people who believe the water can be offended do not poison it lightly.

The Gear

Traps were the ingenious heart of the lake's craft — above all the papyrus-woven **oung'a**, "arguably the most common trap," in many shapes and sizes. Beside it stand the **soyo** spear-stick, the **orindi** cork-wood raft, and the **osech kiteng'**, basket traps worked by women in the shallows. Rules governed nets, hooks, baits and canoes alike.

Women and the Catch

The documented division stands: men caught; women dried, processed and sold, and worked their own basket traps in the shallows. The modern shore has added the jaboya relationship and the women-led "No Sex for Fish" cooperative response — and this book presents these as the modern chapter of an old female command of the fish trade, not as its beginning.

Two honest gaps close the chapter. The exact traditional sharing fractions of a catch could not be documented in print, and no published source found in this research gives a Luo title of beach leader; the documented authorities are the clan elders under chike-lupo, and today the Beach Management Units. If Nyangweso's beaches had a named office and a named sharing rule, the men who held it are the only press that printed it — ask them. The lake lives in the proverbs too: Yie tho ka ogik gowo — "A boat capsizes when it is about to reach the shore" (failure often comes when success is close) — and Fulu bende oro ngege — "The small fish fulu also sends tilapia": the seemingly insignificant also have their use to society.

Roots to Remember

- Chike-lupo — the clan rules of fishing — governed nets, hooks, baits, canoes, and access to the lake itself.
- The elders' closed season (February–June) turned men to the fields; the state's season (April–August) is a separate, later law.
- The lake was a sacred commons: soaps and lemons were believed to pollute the rivers and kill fish.
- Women held the trade: drying, processing, selling — and their own basket traps in the shallows.
- What print never recorded — the sharing fractions, the beach offices — waits in the memory of the fishing elders.

Chapter 35 — Crafts: The Work of Hands

The last chapter of this part honors the makers. The old dala ran on skilled hands — potters, weavers of baskets and traps, workers of iron — and one of its crafts is documented so well that it can be mapped village by village. It begins, fittingly, in Edwin's own home ground.

Pottery: The Women's Guild

Luo pottery is one of the best-documented crafts in this whole book, thanks to the ethnoarchaeology of Ingrid Herbich and Michael Dietler (fieldwork 1978–1982). Pottery is made **entirely by women** — and by very few of them: less than 1 percent of women are potters, "yet they manage to supply nearly all Luo homes with a diverse range of forms" for cooking, serving and storage. Potters live in clusters of homesteads centered around clay sources — 27 major clay sources, each with its potter community, in Herbich's core study region alone — digging clay and temper from the ground within about 2 km of home, and selling at local markets. Each potter community has its own "microstyle" — characteristic combinations of decoration, form and technique — and the styles travel with women: because Luo marriage is patrilocal, potters recruited into a community by marriage carry their learned patterns with them, which is how the map of styles was woven. The trade crossed ethnic lines: Luo potters were "major suppliers of pottery to the Kisii/Gusii and some other non-Luo groups," with South Nyanza wares sold largely at **Oyugis market**.

And here the record comes home: Herbich and Dietler name three potter communities — in Alego, Seme, and **Karachuonyo** — producing wares whose forms were copied from imported European models: teapots, cups, saucers, pitchers, plates. Karachuonyo is Nyangweso's own sub-county. The book can place a documented potter community on Edwin's home ground; whether that community is the one remembered locally under a particular name could not be verified in print, and it stands among the elders' questions. The British Museum holds the craft's portrait: a 1929 photograph, "JALUO potters near KISUMU," showing Luo women hand-building pots.



Elder women potters of the Ochuna Craft Cooperative shaping clay pots under a tree — the women's guild of clay, teaching and reviving the craft today. Photo: Docesbe via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

> **Jachwech chiemo e tago.**
>
> "A potter eats in a potsherd."
>
> Amid plenty, one may still be in need; the maker is not always the enjoyer. Jachwech — the moulder — names the potter, and God as Creator.

Basketry and Fiber

The winnowing basket **odheru** is in the riddles — "the wide one made of ribs" — and the light carrying basket in a proverb:

> **Atonga ma yot ema iyombogo koth.**
>
> "It is a light basket with which one can outrun the rain."
>
> Bite off what you can chew.

Women in the 1902 Hobley photograph carry "small woven baskets for daily use," and papyrus fiber became the lake's traps, as the last chapter told. The basket was the quiet technology of every errand, every harvest, every market day.

Ironworking — and a Word Corrected

Iron was present and prized: the **nyamarich**, the iron blade a man shaved with; hoes and spears as the region's iron goods; a Luo spear in the National Museums of Kenya's collection is catalogued as "made from scrap metal by a blacksmith." The Kisii University study of Central Nyanza notes that the neighboring Gusii and Kuria, Bantu-speaking peoples of the early Iron Age in the region, "are credited with introducing iron smelting and the use of iron tools to the area" — the honest picture is of iron technology shared and traded across the whole lake basin, with Luo smiths working iron within it. The specific Dholuo occupational word for a blacksmith could not be verified in this research — and one candidate must be ruled out plainly, so the error never enters the teaching: **jathieth means the healer**, "one who treats," not the smith. The smith's true title goes to the elders' questions.

Boat Building: An Honest Gap

Rusinga Island's boat-building tradition is real in living memory, and the British Library's Endangered Archives photographs document Rusinga life around 1901. But no published account of Rusinga boat-building method, timber, or builder's craft was secured in the research behind this book, and none is invented here. It stands in the elders' questions, where the Mbita–Rusinga shore can answer it from the memory of the builders' own families. A heritage book earns trust not only by what it prints, but by what it refuses to print.

Roots to Remember

- Pottery was a women's guild: fewer than 1 percent of women supplied nearly every Luo home.
- A documented potter community stood in Karachuonyo — Nyangweso's own sub-county.
- Pot styles traveled with brides: patrilocal marriage wove the map of the craft.
- Jathieth is the healer, never the blacksmith — the smith's true title is an elders' question.
- What the record cannot prove, this book does not print: Rusinga's boat-building waits for living memory.

Closing

What the century took, what it could not take, and the questions this book now hands to the only people who can finish it — the elders of Nyangweso.

Chapter 36 — What Was Lost, What Can Return

How the old way thinned

The sources agree on the drivers, and none of them is a mystery: Christianity as the missions taught it, Western schooling, urban wage migration, land fragmented smaller with every generation, cattle herds shrunk from dozens to two or three, and the sheer cost of the old rituals in a cash economy. The elders of the Luo Council of Elders say it in their own words. Ker Odungi Randa, the Council's chairman: "Today, a majority of Luo are Christians, embracing a foreign culture that has profoundly impacted the preservation of our own heritage. The intrinsic value of our practices seems diminished, as many perceive Christian culture as superior and a mark of civilisation." Jotham Ajiki, the Council's organizing secretary, points to the material root: "Fifty years ago, life was different. People had land, food, and cattle. Today, many cannot afford these rituals since they're struggling just to eat." A commentator in the same reporting put the herd change in one number: most homes now keep two or three cattle — "a far cry from the 40 or more once typical in a Luo homestead."

Some losses came early. Nak, the removal of the six lower teeth, had already dwindled by the 1960s under mission and school pressure — its fading is a century-old story, not a recent one. The evening school faded with the houses that held it: researchers of the story-song tradition record that "the traditional setting of storytelling is now almost extinct" — no siwindhe to sleep in, no fire at the duol, grandchildren at school, on phones, or in town. A 2026 study of the Luo of Lower Nyakach found "a significant decline in sacred ecological rituals" and "a growing generational disconnect in the transmission" of the old ecological knowledge — the reading of birds, seasons, and sacred places that once governed planting and fishing.

Some institutions are debated, not simply mourned. Tero buru is now often omitted at Christian burials — at the burial of Professor George Magoha in Siaya in February 2023, it was set aside at the family's request, and Bishop Martin Arara of the Gem Council of Elders explained: "This is a Christian family. Since such traditional rituals are usually initiated by the family, and they have not done so, we will not be carrying out Tero Buru." The widow rites carry the hardest documented record: a study in Kagan, here in Homa Bay, found that despite the original protective intention of widow inheritance, its modern form — professional inheritors, disease risk, humiliation — "has made widows vulnerable," and recommended community education aimed at elders, inheritors, and widows alike. And in July 2025, Raila Odinga urged Luo leaders to rethink goyo dala itself:

scattered homesteads fragment family land — his example was 20 acres split four ways — and make water, power, roads, and clinics hard to deliver; clustered housing, he argued, serves the family better now. The argument sparked debate at the Piny Luo Festival. It is recorded here as what it is: a living argument among the people's own leaders about which old forms still serve the people's good.

What has not vanished

The honest picture is transformation and thinning — not disappearance. Burial at home endures, and with it the great communal funeral and the funeral harambee. Bridewealth is still negotiated, in cattle and cash together. A son's simba is still built before a father's burial in cases reported in recent years. The Luo Council of Elders still sits. On Rusinga, the Suba — whose language was pronounced dying — have published a Bible in Olusuba and raised a festival that draws the island home every year. On Ramogi FM and Ramogi TV, proverbs and tales ride the airwaves to an audience the fireside never reached. The scholars who know this record best warn against two errors at once: romanticizing the past, and declaring it dead.

What can return

Not everything should return, and this book has not pretended otherwise — the chapters on the widow rites and the teeth say plainly what they say. But the heart of the old way was never a rite. It was a posture toward one another: riwruok, unity as strength; the work party that made a neighbor's burden the village's burden; the elder honored as a library while he still lives; the table whose law fed the stranger before greeting him; the word kept, because a person is his word. Those things are not antiques. They are tools, and they still work.

They return the way they were built — by practice, not by proclamation. A work party called for a real task is konyir alive, whatever name the village gives it. An elder visited, honored, asked, and recorded is the siwindhe rebuilt with new walls. A proverb taught to a child at the evening meal is the fireside, carried. A community that decides together — the young bringing the work, the elders bringing the judgment, as it was always done — is the council under the tree, sitting again.

This book is one such practice: an attempt to gather what the written record holds before more of it scatters, and to hand the rest to the people who still carry it. The last chapter is theirs.

Roots to Remember

- The old way thinned under real pressures — land, herds, schooling, migration, cost — not because it was worthless.
- Transformation is not disappearance: burial at home, bridewealth, the Council of Elders, and Dholuo broadcasting all live on.
- What returns is the heart, not every rite: unity, the shared work, the honored elder, the fed stranger, the kept word.
- Roots do not die. They only wait for rain — and a community can choose to be the rain.

Chapter 37 — Questions Only Our Elders Can Answer

Everything in this book that could be found in print has been found and weighed. What follows could not be found in any book — because it was never written down. It lives in Nyangweso, in the memory of its oldest people. These questions gather, in one place, every gap the research honestly met. They are arranged by theme. Take them on your visits. Honor first. Ask the oldest first. Ask permission before recording. Write the answers down the same day — and let the answers correct this book where this book is wrong.

The land and its names

1. Which clans and families founded Nyangweso, in what order, and who were its first elders? Where exactly were the first dalas, and what was here before them?
2. What do family traditions say Chich Onuno's market was like before 1925 — who traded there, what was sold — and how did people receive the renaming to "Homa Bay"?
3. Do Nyangweso-area families keep Suba words, clan names, or customs from Suba ancestors or neighbors? Which families, and what survives?
4. Which steamers do family memories name at the Homa Bay and Kendu Bay piers? What did families carry to the pier to sell or send, and what came back?
5. Which Nyangweso men were taken for the Carrier Corps in 1914–18, and for the second war in 1939–45? Who came home, who did not, and are letters, medals, or names still kept?
6. What does family memory hold of the 1918–19 flu — and of the famine and locust years the elders' parents named?

The dala and the work

1. What did your grandfathers call the work party here — konyir, saga, or another word? How was it summoned, who owed attendance, who cooked, what was eaten and drunk, and what exactly did the host owe the workers?
2. When was the last true work party held in Nyangweso, and for what work? What happened to a man who ate at other men's work parties but never appeared at theirs — a fine, a song, shaming at the duol, exclusion?

3. When a dala was founded here, which site test was used — the cockerel under the basket, the three unhatched eggs, or something else — and who pointed out the site?
4. Where exactly were the dead buried in the old homesteads of this area, and was a grave ever produced as proof in a land dispute here?
5. What did the doho of this area actually fine people — how many cattle or goats for theft, for adultery, for wounding — and who received and kept the fine? Was an oath (kuong'ruok) ever sworn here — on what object, with what words?
6. Which women in this area were recognized law-keepers? Did the dani or pim settle disputes between wives, children, or daughters-in-law — and how was her word enforced?
7. When land registration reached this area, whose names went onto the titles, and what happened to the rights of the jodak farming borrowed land — and to widows' gardens?
8. Are there Dholuo words used here for the fence, the gate, and the hearth that differ from ojuok, rangach, and kendo — and is thur a word your grandfathers used for anything?

The year and the rites

1. Who was jagol pur in Nyangweso — who sowed the very first seed each season, and how did word travel that the rest might begin? Was anyone here ever disciplined for sowing early?
2. Was the first-harvest feast, fwachira, held village-wide here or house by house? Who brewed the busaa, who poured it on the ground, and what words were said over the pouring?
3. Which season and month names did the old people here actually use? Did they watch the Yugini stars, and which birds or insects told them to sow?
4. Where did Nyangweso people pray in drought — is there a clan shrine or sacred tree in Karachuonyo or Kanyada that the old people used? Who kept it, and when was it last used?
5. Which hunger years do the oldest people here remember, and what Dholuo nicknames did those famines carry? What wild leaves, roots, and fruits did women gather in the lean months — and can they still name and find them?
6. When twins were born here, exactly what was done — who was secluded, for how long, what was sung or slaughtered, and what were the parents forbidden to do?

7. Who was the tooth-cutter for this area, where did he sit, at what age were children taken, and what were they promised for their courage? Does anyone here still carry the gap of nak?
8. What did families in this area actually give in marriage in the 1940s–1960s — how many head of cattle, and what were the named cattle called here? Who still negotiates in cattle today?
9. How were deaths by lightning, and other bad deaths, handled here — and how has burial in Nyangweso changed across one lifetime: the grave's place, the days kept, tero buru, and what the elders believe should be kept, changed, or let go?
10. What do the oldest families remember of the first mission schools and churches — the first baptisms, the first readers, the teachers' names, what the missions forbade, and what families quietly kept doing anyway?

The voice and the table

1. When riddles are opened in Nyangweso, what exactly do the contender and the audience call to each other, word for word?
2. Busaa in Nyangweso: who brewed it, who was allowed to drink, what words were spoken over the pot, and what rules governed the straws and the order of drinking?
3. Beyond the tongue for the old men, how was a slaughtered goat — and a slaughtered cow — portioned, piece by piece and rank by rank?
4. What was sung at grinding, at weeding, and at the hauling of nets? What wedding songs and funeral dirges do the oldest singers still carry whole?
5. The full counting system and the old time-words, as the elders learned them — and how was the market week counted?
6. Who in Nyangweso still wore pien — skin dress — and rek beads, and for what occasions? Is "ochuna" a word the old people here know, and what exactly does it name?

The lake and the crafts

1. At the beaches Nyangweso's fishermen used, how was a catch divided — what went to the boat owner, to the crew, to the beach, to the widow and the stranger? Was there a named beach office, and what was it called?

2. Who were Nyangweso's ironworkers, what were they called, and where did their iron come from? And the boat builders of the Mbita–Rusinga shore: whose craft was it, and what timber did they choose?
3. The potters of Karachuonyo: where exactly are the clay sources nearest Nyangweso, which families carried the craft, and what name did the potter community carry here?

Roots to Remember

- Every question in this chapter is a page the written record could not print.
- Honor first, ask the oldest first, and write the answers down the same day.
- The elders are not the book's audience only — they are its remaining authors.

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Foundation research — Old Homa Bay and Luo Culture (2026)

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- **Lake Victoria at Homa Bay — the town shore and Homa Hill across the bay.** Photo: RogerCroti via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **Lake Victoria as seen near Kendu Bay, on the Karachuonyo shore.** Photo: SuSanA Secretariat via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2).
- **Lake Simbi Nyaima, the crater lake at Karachuonyo — flamingos along its shore.** Photo: Mikegregs via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **Kit Mikayi, the great rock formation near Kisumu — a Luo sacred and prayer site.** Photo: Valerius Tygart via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3).
- **Fishing on Lake Victoria at Rusinga Island — boats and fishermen at work.** Photo: Ryan Harvey via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 2).
- **A traditional Luo homestead in Nyanza — the husband's, wives' and sons' thatched huts, raised woven granaries (dero) on stilts, and the fenced enclosure on swept red earth.** Photo: Susangesare via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **Neighbors raising the timber frame of a traditional house together — a modern work party, konyir in today's clothes.** Photo: Woodwayne via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **A small herd of zebu cattle grazing under trees at a Nyanza homestead.** Photo: Veeaj via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **Two elder women of the Ochuna Craft Cooperative shaping clay pots under a tree — elders teaching and reviving the traditional crafts.** Photo: Docesbe via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **A woman in traditional dress and ornament at the Rusinga Island cultural festival.** Photo: Jeffmugendi via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **A nyatiti player in 1936, seated before a thatched house, wearing an ostrich-feather headdress, the great bowl lyre in his hands.** Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
- **A twentieth-century Luo nyatiti from Nyanza, held at the Musical Instrument Museum, Phoenix — the carved neck, strings and decorated bowl.** Photo: Terry Ballard via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2).

- **A living nyatiti player (the musician Brian Robin) with his instrument in a Nairobi studio — the tradition carried today.** Photo: Artbeatmusicke via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **Luo musicians performing traditional songs at night — drums, shakers and voices.** Photo: Timlamec via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **An abuu, the great Luo trumpet, on display at the Nairobi National Museum, calabashes hanging beside it.** Photo: Bärbel Miemietz via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4).
- **A Luo dancer in a great ostrich-feather headdress, holding a spear, at the Eldoret Agricultural Show; another dancer behind him. Mid-twentieth century.** Photo: Tropenmuseum collection (photographer not named on the file page) via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3).
- **Tom Mboya of Rusinga — portrait photograph, 1962.** Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
- **The Tom Mboya Mausoleum at Kasawanga, Rusinga Island — the round brick building with the tall white conical roof.** Photo: Wycondi via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3).

About Empower Impact Kenya CBO

Empower Impact Kenya CBO is a registered community based organization serving Nyangweso and the surrounding community in Karachuonyo, Homa Bay County, Kenya. It is led by four officers — a Chairman, Vice Chairman, Treasurer, and Secretary — under a signed constitution, and it works on a simple order: build income-producing community businesses first, so that helping the community does not depend on donations alone.

Its work includes a growing chicken enterprise (eggs, chicks, feed, and manure), a dignity program keeping schoolgirls in school, a youth program in which young men serve their community under the guidance of its elders, and the Back to Our Roots work — of which this book is a part — recovering the heritage, values, and togetherness of the old way for the life of the community today.

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