

Narrations of Precolonial Society among Terik of Western Kenya

Eliud Biegon

biegon.elius@ku.ac.ke

Lecturer in History, Department of History, Archaeology and Political
Studies

Kenyatta University

Nairobi, Kenya

LHEAF Conference at Leiden University

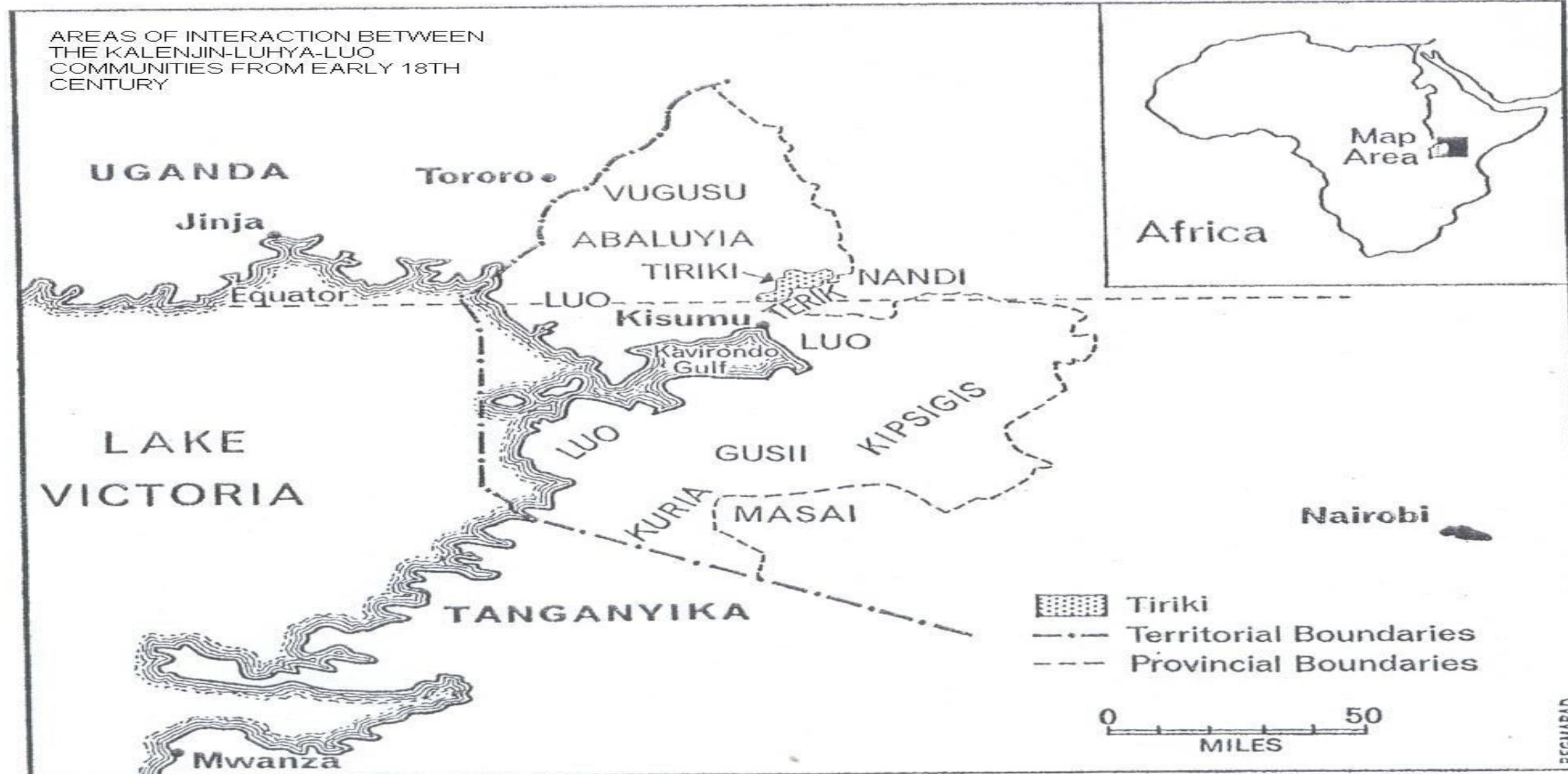
6 to 8 June, 2024

(presented on 7 June 2024)

Abstract

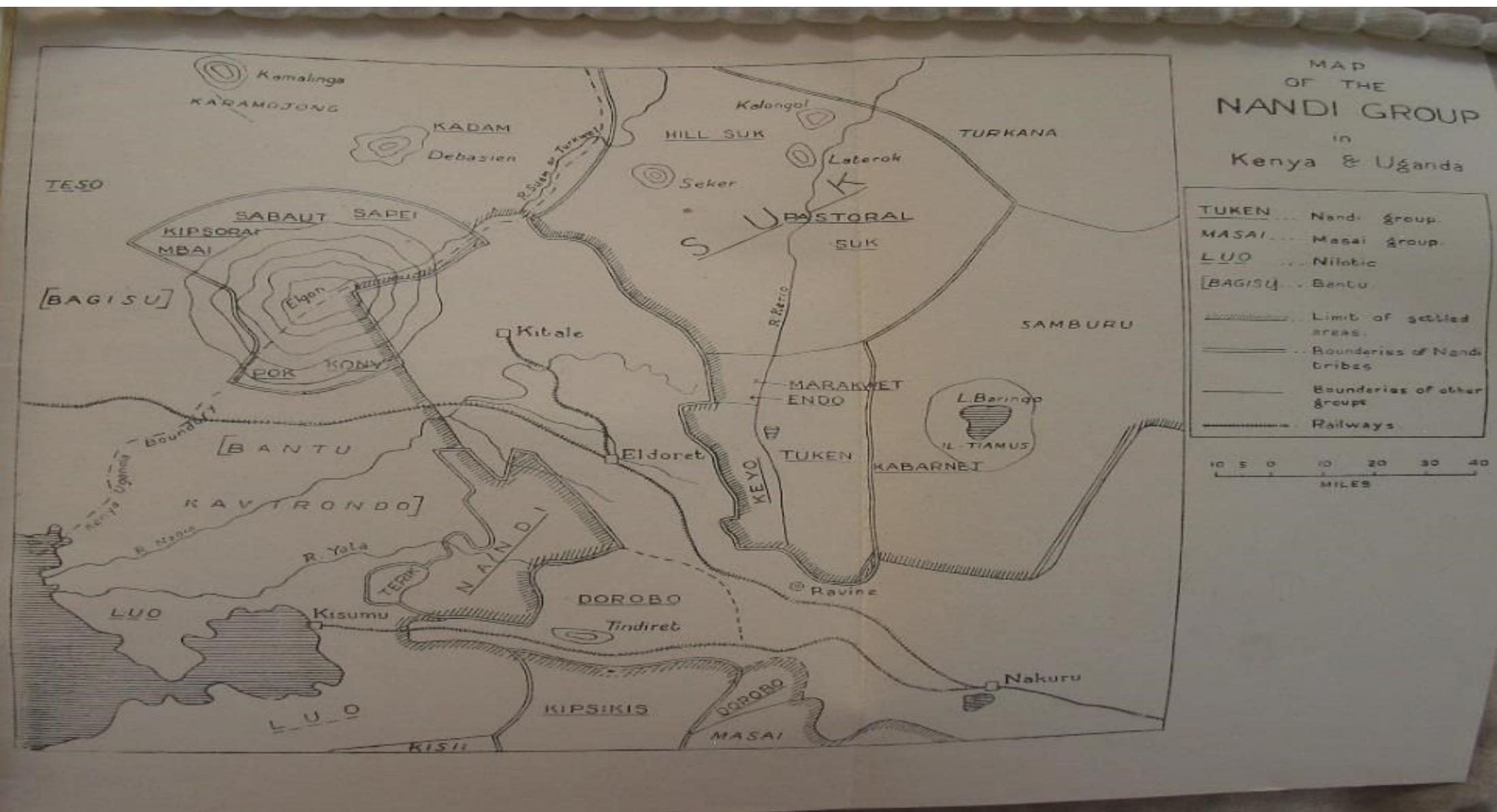
The present work considers the present-day oral recollections of Terik informants on aspects of their precolonial society, and relating them to the scant available written evidence. Four important themes emerged from the interviews conducted among Terik people between 2013 to 2016. Firstly, concerning land ownership and usage, present day Terik narrations emphasize their pastoralist past and the oral evidence shows an egalitarian and communal form of land ownership at least until the early colonial period. Even then, most Terik seem to have practised some crop farming which they seek to understate in the present. Secondly, hierarchy seems to have been dispersed at various levels, but two broad categories are discernible, which can be described as juridical-political versus ritual. Thirdly, relationships between Terik and neighbouring communities (particularly Luhyia sub-groups) seem to have been fluid and to some extent complementary in the precolonial period, alternating between mutually beneficial exchange of land, warriors and wives. Finally, informants frequently said that aside from natural calamities or wars, the one social event that brought all the Terik together in one activity was the circumcision ceremonies (*tumndo*). The importance of *tumndo* is found in two of its basic functions; first, as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and, secondly, the very conferment of personhood and obligations.

Figure 1: Terik Area and Neighbouring Communities



SOURCE: Sangree, W. H., (1966: XXVI)

Map 1: Map Showing the Population Distribution of the 'Nandi Groups' in Early 1930s



Content

1. Land and Pre-colonial Terik
2. Social and Political Organization of Pre-colonial Terik
3. Inter-Community Relations
4. Tumndo

(Briefly on method. Period-mainly late pre-colonial period)

Land Pre-colonial Terik

Terik topography: *Soi (Geo)-lowlands, cattle grazing salt licks; Masaan-houses, kapkoros and Kabonyony, Sino-cold uplands, forested, unsettled.*

Tuga-cattle (belonging to men. Except the milch cow)

Goat-Arheth (belonging to the household, women)

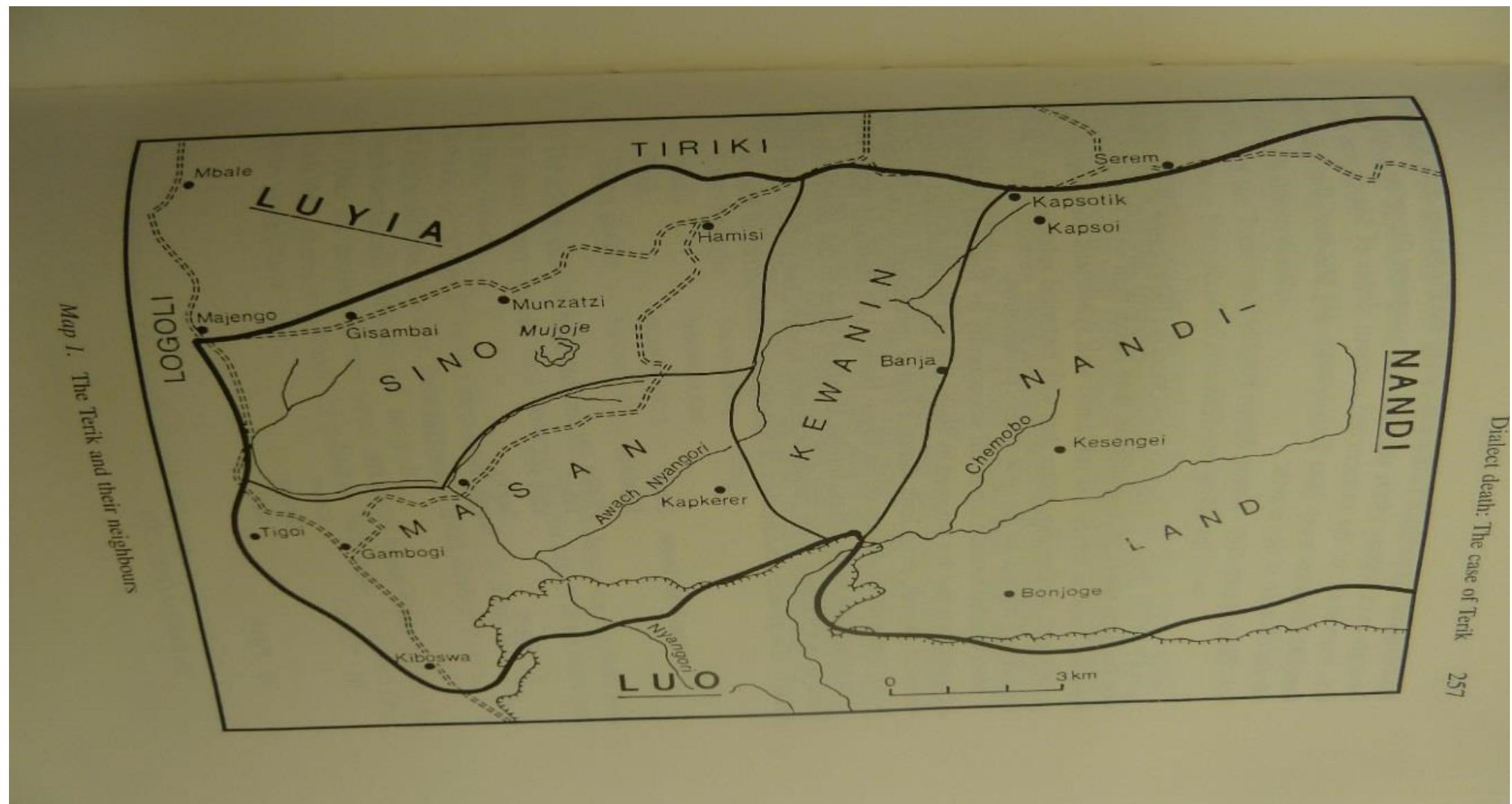
Sheep-Ngechiryeth (belonging to the household, women)

Terejeetab Maiywek-rituals of alcohol

Terejeetab Beek-Rituals of water

Gendered tensions between Pastoralism and Agriculture

Terik Concept of Territory



Source: Heine, B., 'Dialect death: the case of Terik', in Brenzinger (ed.) *Language Death Factual and Theoretical Explorations with Special Reference to East Africa*, Berlin/New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1992: 255.

Social and Political Organization in Pre-colonial Terik

Bororiet (booriet means war or battle. Hence the basic territorial fighting unit), **Kookwet** (neighbourhood. Sometimes bororiet and Kokwet terms were interchangeable) and **Oret** (literally means door/lineage. This was not necessarily territorial even though most of the times members of a lineage lived in the same area/village. In some cases).

Categories of political power

Juridical/Political-*Kiruogindet*

Military/Political-*Kiptaiyat*

Ritual/Prophetic power-*Orkoiyot, Jeptumitiot*

Tumndo-Jeptumiot, Jeptuminik

Figure 1: An Artist's Impression of a Terik Circumcision Elder (Jeptumiot) Wearing his Traditional Regalia



Source: The image is published courtesy of informant Richard Kiblagat Buan Araab Jepkoi

Figure 2: An artist's Impression of Jepsirgoi Ojowi

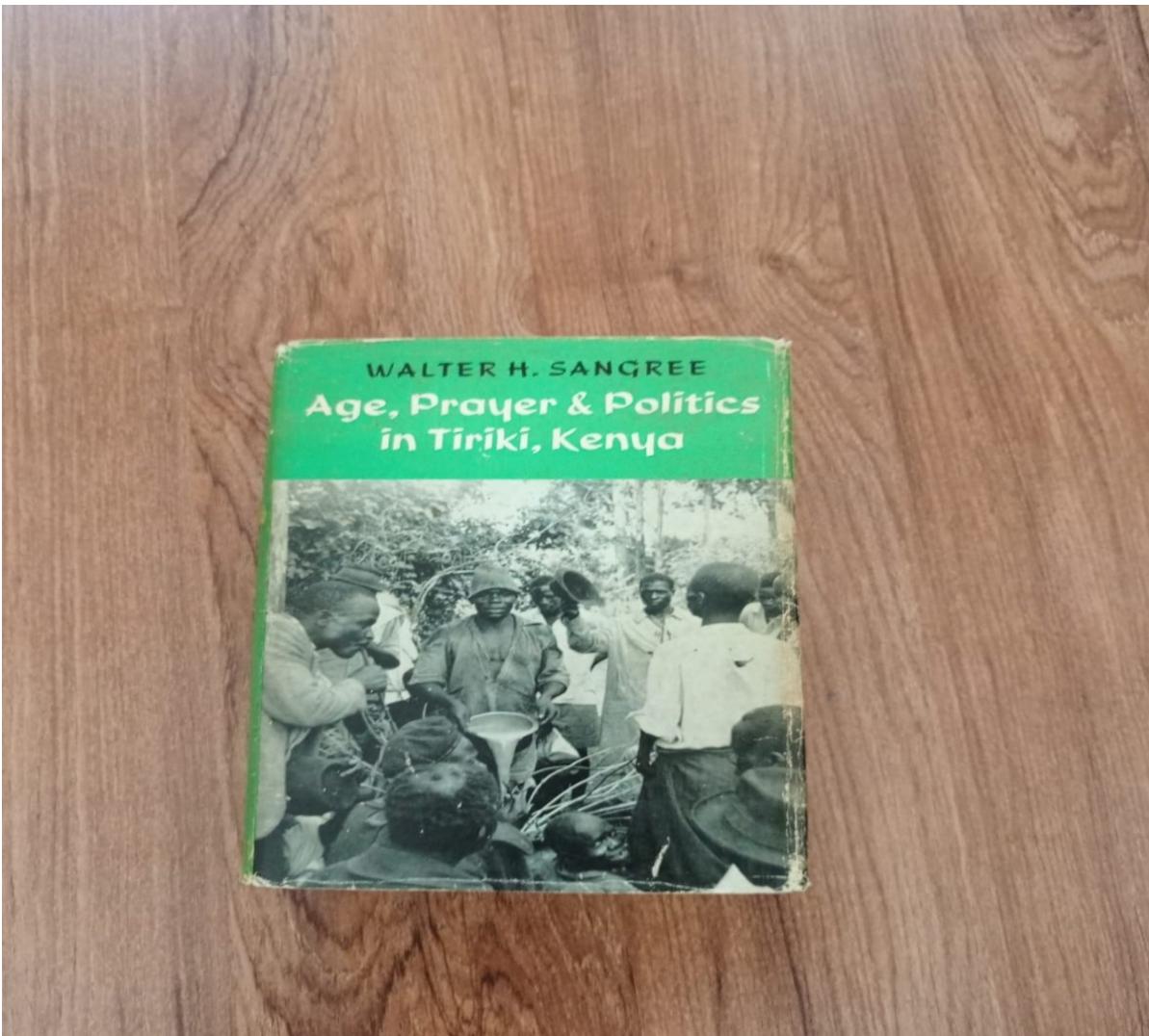


Figure drawn by of Richard Kiblagat Araab Jepkoi (Great great grandson to Jepsirgoi Ojowi). Jepsirgoi is shown wearing the ritual garment of the Giruogindet known as Sambut. This is a garment made from a leopard skin. The Giruogindet also always walks with his spear, sitting stool and a knobbery/club

Intercommunity Relations

Terik-Tiriki Relations: Evolution of Tiriki Identity

Walter Sangree experience in studying Tiriki in the late 1950s. His book published in 1958.



Walter Sangree (1966: 4)

...Tiriki lineage history recounts in detail the agnatic line from the time the wondering ancestor first arrived in the region of Tiriki and was initiated into the tribe. This line may extend back six years or seven generations, which suggests that this is when Abaluyia (sic) groups incorporated by the nilom-Hamite Terik (sic) into their age group. In many cases, the lineage depth since incorporation as Tiriki is four or five generations...'

John Osogo. *History of the Baluhya*. 1966: 56

...The Tiriki are a mere collection of clans. Some of the clans from Nandi and Nyang'ori; from Maragoli, Idakho, Bunyore and other thickly populated areas. Anyone can become Tiriki provided he is circumcised according to Tiriki circumcision, which involves a certain amount of oathing. Many people in search of land have joined the Tiriki this way...

Kiprop Arap Korir, O.I., 2014

The attacks on Terik by the Kaptumois section of Nandi led to the emergence of Tiriki people. The Kaptumois drove away our cattle and assaulted our women several times. Terik people became irritated by the Kaptumois and blew the *gondet* (horn) as a declaration of war against Kaptumois. The Terik managed to drive out the Kaptumois who grew weak and climbed the trees as sign of surrender. Terik do not kill a helpless enemy who had surrendered by climbing up the trees. Their neighbours and military friends, the Bookwek, did not understand this. With the encouragement of Terik, the Bookwek went ahead to fell the trees and kill the Kaptumois. As result of this, the Terik-Bookwek relations became stronger.

Tumndo

‘...Tumndo is the key to the secret life of the Terik...’ (Jebangwa 2014).

‘...The initiates are referred to as cow during the entire exercise...’ (Korir, 2014).

‘...initiation is considered such a crucial stage in life that before going through this rite, a young person is not considered a Kalenjin but a child of a Kalenjin...’ (Ciarunji Chesaina. *Oral Literature of the Kalenjin*. 1991: 5).

‘...male and female circumcision were highly regarded. This was most important event. It brought the whole community. All relatives came to share joy of families that initiates...’ (Kiptarus Arab Tanui, O.I., 2013).

Tumndo and Age set System

Age sets Names (Sangree, 1966: 70).

Terik	Tiriki
Gabnenach	Kablalach
Gorongoro (Gibkoymet)	Golongolo
Gimnyigei	Jiminigayi
Nyaanki	Nyonje
Mayna	Mayina
Juuma	Juma
Sawe	Sawe

Sangree, 1966: 70... Tiriki followed the lead of the Terik in the matters of circumcision and naming age groups....

Terik Age sets-Source: Table constructed from interviews with Terik informants for the present study

TERIK AGE SETS		ESTIMATED YEAR OF BIRTH		ACTUAL YEAR(S) NAMED		ESTIMATED YEAR	
NAME OF CYCLE							
NYAANKI				1910s			
Kiphoithoi						2024	
Thethagat						2020	
Kipthoru						2016	
Jongin		1880s				2012	
GIMNYIGEY							
Kiphoithoi		1890				2008	
Thethagat						2004	
Kipthoru		1880				2000	
Jongin		1870				1996	
GABNEENAACH							
Kiphoithoi				1985		1992	
Thethagat						1988	
Kipthoru						1984	
Jongin				1970		1980	
GIBKOYMET							
Kiphoithoi						1976	
Thethagat				1951		1992	
Kipthoru				1948		1968	
Jongin						1964	
SAAVE							
Kiphoithoi		1932		1952		1960	
Thethagat						1956	
Kipthoru						1952	
Jongin						1948	
JUUMO							
Kiphoithoi						1944	
Thethagat						1940	
Kipthoru						1936	
Jongin				1936, 1938		1932	
MAYNA							
Kiphoithoi				1932		1928	
Thethagat						1924	
Kipthoru						1920	
Jongin						1916	
DROPPED AGE SETS							
Antara							
Bantaneen							
Kamunyaar							
Tamamut							

Kongoy Mising!

Chesaina, Ciarunji. *Oral Literature of the Kalenjin*. Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1991.

Chirchir-Chuma, Kipketter. 'Aspects of Nandi Society and Culture in the Nineteenth Century.' In *Kenya Historical Review* 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Ehret, Christopher. *Southern Nilotic History*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1971.

Keller, Otto and Marian Keller. *Outline of Work at Nyang'ori Mission Station, British East Africa, The Pentecostal Testimony*. Toronto: PAOC, 1932.

Kipkorir, Benjamin. *Descent from Cherangany Hills: Memoirs of a Reluctant Academic*. Nairobi: Macmillan Kenya (Publishers) Ltd. 2009.

Langley, Myrtle. *The Nandi of Kenya, Life Crisis Rituals in a Period of Change*. London: C. Hurst & Company, 1979.

Matson, Albert. *Nandi Resistance to British Rule*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972.

Moore, Henrietta and Todd Saunders. *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Post-colonial Africa*. Routledge: London, 2001.

Oboler, Regina. *Women, Power and Economic Change: The Nandi of Kenya*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.

Osogo, John. *History of the Baluhya*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Peristiany, Jean. *The Social Institutions of the Kipsigis*. New York: Humanities Press, 1930.

Roeder, Hilke. *Sprachlicher Wandel und Gruppenbewusstsein bei den Terik, Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika*. Beiheft 7, Hamburg: Helmut Buske, 1986.

Sangree, Walter. *Ace, Prayer and Politics in Tiriki, Kenya*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.