

Luo Cultural Shrines: The Hembko of Got Ramogi, Kenya

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Abstract:- Got Ramogi in Kenya is a hill shrouded with many mysteries and awe-inspiring cultural beliefs and practices. The hill has attracted the interests of archeologists, geologists, historians, ethnographers, foresters, herbalists, worshippers, politicians and tourists in equal measure.

Ramogi Ajwang', the founder father of the Luo nation, is believed to have settled on the strategic hill when his people arrived in Kenya through Uganda from the southern Sudan. The objective of the study was to establish the number of cultural sites and shrines (hembko) at the hill, the cultural beliefs and practices associated with them, and the spiritual significance of each shrine on the spirituality and the future of the Luo community in Kenya and the diaspora. The information discussed in his paper was obtained through internet library research using the Google search engine. Google is considered to be the most popular and the best search engine due to its advanced algorithms and vast database. The search was able to identify nine (9) cultural shrines or hembko in Dholuo. Each of these shrines had unique name and function in the cultural and spiritual heritage of the people. The Luo offered spotless animal rituals to their God Nyasaye to propitiate or placate the supernatural world for continued prosperity and posterity. Further research should be conducted on Ramogi Hill to discover even more unearthed shrines.

Keywords:- Got Ramogi, Hembko, Luo, Culture, Beliefs, Rituals.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is a library and oral research on the sacred shrines (hembko) of Got Ramogi, and their significance on the cultural heritage and spirituality of the Luo community of Kenya and East Africa.

Ramogi Hills (Got Ramogi in Dholuo), is the first place and point where Ramogi Ajwang', the father of the Luo nation, settled in [1425](#) AD after the Nilotic Luo dispersed from Pubungu- Pakwach in Uganda, during their migration from southern Sudan. Ramogi himself was a great warrior with super magical powers to boot.

Situated in East Yimbo in present-day Siaya County on the northeastern shores of Nam Lolwe (Lake Victoria) basin in Kenya, Got Ramogi is a revered hilly forest associated with several myths and folklore. The Luo elders hold the indigenous forest with high esteem and reverence.

Got Ramogi is estimated to be seven kilometers from Usenge beach and 20 kilometers from Bondo town. The hill is the place to visit and to learn more about the history and culture of the Luo (Odhiambo, [2020](#)).

Got Ramogi is a dry hilly sacred tropical forest covering an area of [283](#) hectares of land, with over 20 species of birds, a variety of endangered indigenous trees, flora and fauna, and traditional herbal medicine.

Got Ramogi is a hill of multiple purposes. It is a major tourist attraction site. Got Ramogi hosts a resort very popular with tourists and locals alike. A cottage at Ramogi Hill in Bondo costs KES [5,000](#) a night, including all meals. These cottages are situated three kilometers from the foot of the hill.

Beyond the cottages is a thick forest associated with several myths such as that one can come into contact with Ramogi himself or his first wife *mikai* Nyang'idia who turned into a big snake and is now dwelling in the forest. Tourists are often accompanied by tour guides so that they do not disappear in the thick forest, according to Odhiambo (2020).

Got Ramogi is a favorite site for hikers, and provides a moment of joy to them. But for those who suffer from height phobia, the hill provides anxious moments. Its hilly rough terrain, combined with the quiet ambiance below tall trees, make it an ideal place for picnics, camping, and corporate team building (Nelcon Odhiambo, Daily Nation, July 20, [2020](#)).

For the archeologists, Got Ramogi is a historical site rich in traditional artifacts and the cultural heritage of the Luo community. The hill is home to sanctuaries and shrines where people from far and wide come to offer rituals and sacrifices.

Politicians, renowned and even little-known, pay homage and pilgrimage to the hills to pray and offer sacrifices to the spirit of Ramogi to boost their political fortunes. They resort to Got Ramogi to cure their political misfortunes.

The Luo strongly believed and still believe in Nyasaye, Obong'o Were, Nyakalaga, the only Creator of all creatures on the earth whom they worshipped and sacrificed to in the sacred shrines known as hembko or hembho in different Dholuo dialects.

Nyasaye, Nyasae or Nasaye for the Luo people means "the creator of the beginning" (Franklin, P.J.L., & Omar, Y.A. (1995). The Word for God in Kiswahili: Further Considerations. *Journal of Religion in Africa* .25(2): [202-211](#). doi:[10.2307/1581274](#)). The other Luo word for God is Obong'o Nyakalaga which gives a much clearer perception of the people about God. Obong'o means one of a kind, while Nyakalaga means the all-powerful everlasting one.

These definitions demonstrate that the Luo people were and still are strictly monotheistic. Their God was the only one, single, unique and outstanding male one Obong'o (a name usually given to an only male child, with the same connotation as Were). Nyakalaga has the connotation of omnipresent, boundless, with power and presence everywhere. The word Nyasaye for the Luo has the same meaning and connotation as the word God in English: a supreme high superpower to adore, beseech and worship. Therefore, any claim that the Luo were

introduced to the Christian one God at the advent of Christianity in Luoland is very far from the truth, and smacks of racial arrogance or ignorance, and lack of serious research.

These holy shrines, sacred trees, huge rocks, caves, high hills, the new moon and the setting sun, and Lake Victoria were all associated with the supernatural and the invincible spirits of their departed forefathers. For the Luo, the spirit is a God given gift of force in man which when he dies goes back to where it belongs (world of spirits). They recognized spirits as those of the living-dead who were concerned with their progresses and well-being in their daily lives.

Depending on how they were treated in this life or at death, these spirits could bring good or badomen, to bless the people or to harm their victims.

The Luo traditionally had healers, witchdoctors, and sorcerers, all of whom were concerned with the powers of the spirits (*juogi*). These spirits possessed people who followed them. For example, the spirit of mumbo was believed to live in Lake Victoria. Mumbo became a religious cult, and its followers (*jomumbo*), possessed by its spirits, were characterized by outbursts of hysteria and wearing of forest shrubs and headdress (*buombwe*), according to Evans-Pritchard (1936).

II. THE HEMBKO OF GOT RAMOGI

➤ **Pong'**, was the grinding stone for *bell* sorghum, *kal* finger millet and *marieba* dry cassava for preparing uji (*nyuka*) and ugali (*kuon*). It was the posho mill of the time for the women folk whose ascribed duty it was to prepare meals for their households. The first diesel-driven posho mills in Luoland seem to have come around in the early 20th century.

Pong' consisted of the mother stone and the smaller *nyapong'* placed on top of the cereals to be crushed or smashed. Whenever *pong'* the grinding stone became blunt, the female users would sharpen both the mother and the daughter stone (*nyapong'* from *nyar pong'*: the daughter of *pong'*) using the hammer stone (*nyatieng'* or *ratieng'* in South Nyanza Dholuo dialect).

Was it also possible for the women folk to use *pong'* the grinding stone as the shrine where women offered rituals at the beginning of every planting season to get rich yields?

A story is told of a dispute between two women over the grinding stone one day. Owil and Idhi, both sons of Bala, lived with their families around the grinding stone. Soon after Owil's wife gave birth to a baby, she went to grind some grain at the grinding stone. There she met Idhi's wife who refused to allow her to sharpen the grinding stone in readiness for grinding. A dispute arose, Idhi's wife pushed Owil's wife forcing her to fall on her back onto the grinding stone. As a result, Owil's wife bled to death. This unfortunate episode forced Owil and his clan members who were sympathetic to his cause to leave their established homes in Got Ramogi and go back to their relatives in their original homelands in Southern Sudan (Odhiambo, E.A. et al, 2020). By going back to the Sudan, Owil and his people were denouncing the evil killing of a *minyuru* (a woman who had just given birth to a new born baby). Indeed it was a taboo in the first place to fight such a woman. Besides, staying on at the evil spot at the hill would not only be tantamount to sanitizing the evil killing but also be a constant reminder of this evil act to Owil and his people. And as his name suggests, Owil wanted to forget about the sad episode of his wife's death.

The grinding stone then became an isolated and sacred stone and site set aside for oath taking whenever a dispute arose in Ramogi clan (Isaiah Gwengi, The Standard, November 15, 2015). Instead of remaining a point of convergence and sharing of resources in unity, the grinding stone soured human relationship and brought separation. The ordinary site for grinding became the sacred grove for oath taking.

The two parties involved in a quarrel or accusing the other of an evil deed would go and swear by the grinding stone. They would each take *nyatieng'* (hammer stone), and hit the grinding stone, and "the verdict would be automatic" (Odhiambo et al). The guilty party would bleed after this ritual was performed. This flow of blood recalls the bleeding to death of Owil's wife at the grinding stone.

The grinding stone is associated with ancestral spirits that torment evil people in the community. Local folklore believes that the grinding stone *nyapong'* can kill. The spirits dwelling at the shrine can recognize and punish evil. The hembko is bestowed with the supernatural powers to punish evil deeds in the community.

Luo elders from Migori, Homa Bay, Kisumu and Siaya counties often pay pilgrimage to Got Ramogi, and particularly the *pong* shrine, as a way of uniting the people of the four Luo

counties in Kenya. The hembko of *nyapong'* (the grinding stone shrine) is the site of unity calls and settlement of disputes in the Luo community.

"Ramogi Hill is a unifying factor for all the Luos in Siaya, Kisumu, Homa Bay and Migori counties since their ancestors first settled there on their way from South Sudan", according to the Chairman of Luo Council of Elders, Odungi Randa.

The elders recently suggested that each of 12 Luo clans should have their shrine at Got Ramogi as a symbol of unity (Gwengi, 2015).

➤ **Rapogi** is another significant shrine at Ramogi Hills. The sharpening stone, believed to have belonged to Ramogi Ajwang' himself, was used to sharpen spears "before the community went to war or during hunting expeditions".

The Rapogi stone is a huge pike of rock that Ramogi apparently used an altar for offering *misango* (sacrifices) to Nyasaye and his ancestors. He, Ramogi," frequently prayed next to the stone to appease the gods to bless the area with rains in times of drought "(Odhiambo, 2020).

Rapogi was also used to sharpen knives, suckles, pangas, jembes, hoes and other iron tools for cultivation of land and clearing of bushes, skinning domestic and wild animals, harvesting crops and other domestic chores.

Before the people partook of such activities as war or hunting, the Rapogi stone would be "consulted by the elders, and if it 'requested' for a sacrifice, a female goat or a cockerel would be offered to ensure nobody got hurt during the war".

According to Odhiambo et al, (2020)

The choice of a female goat is symbolic of provocation of maternal feelings characteristically aroused in times of uncertainty or when one is faced with danger. These feelings of love or pity showered upon the warriors or hunters give vent to the instinct to protect. The cockerel is the symbol of the warrior or hunter about to undertake the risky venture and who now offers himself for the mother's mercy. Indeed, it was the males that always went to war.

Rapogi, like the hembko of Lwanda Asumbi, would also be consulted during prolonged drought. The elders would offer sacrifices at the Rapogi shrine in order to placate the supernatural spirits associated with the stone, and immediately

the rains would come in torrents. That Rapogi stone would „demand“ sacrifice confirms the extent to which the outcome of human activities was predetermined by the supernatural powers. Appeasing the divinity through consultation and animal sacrifice was a sure way to preempt a calamity.

Women too visited the Rapogi shrine with prayers and sacrifices at the beginning of every planting season. The women folk would soak different samples of seeds, and leave them there overnight. They would collect the seeds the following day and broadcast or sow them in their farms. And true to their own belief, the people would realize bounty harvests, courtesy of Rapogihembko.

Rapogi had supernatural powers. A story is told of how a priest of the Legio Maria sect from the local area called Unyejra was struck by lightning the same day he attempted to burn the sharpening stone, claiming it had evil spirits. The people held the Rapogi sacred rock with great awe and reverence.

Rapogi stone is found at the entrance of Ramogi Hill. When accessing the forest one has to pluck tree figs and put them into the earthen pots surrounding the Rapogi shrine to placate the spirits of Ramogi (Odhiambo, [2020](#)).

➤ **Loch** in the Luo society is a log of wood lying on the earth surface or a peg purposely driven into the earth firmly for tethering animals, especially cattle. Actually every cow knows its peg or loch (*loye*) where it is usually tied overnight after a long day in the grazing fields.

The shrine is a myth of a tethering peg that blossomed into a big tree. Initially this loch was meant for tethering Idhi's cow. The community named the peg that turned into a big sacred tree *Mwanda*. Mwanda is also the Luo word for the wild animal gazelle. What caused the tethering dead peg or tree stump to grow into a big sacred tree is yet to be established by the writer of this article.

Idhi began to jealousy safeguard the big tree, believing it had a great potential. To Idhi, the blooming of loch to a big tree was a sign of his good animal husbandry and potent prosperity and wealth (Odhiambo et al). As a result, Idhi gave each of his sons a scion of the *mwanda* tree whenever they established a home, both as a sign of goodwill, fatherly support and a source of prosperity to his offsprings.

The leaves of the mwanda tree were used as medicine for the sick calves. It worked and ensured their livestock increased in numbers. Their herd, in good health, prospered significantly. Other villagers soon realized the utilitarian magic value of the scion of the mwanda tree, and began to reach out to Idhi's sons for the same scion. As a community, all members benefited from the good will of the scion. Owing to the generosity and communal nature of the Luo, and their concern for one another's welfare, the prosperity brought about by the scion of the mwanda tree soon became a widespread communal affair (Odhiambo et al, 2020).

The significance of the tree grew from livestock prosperity to stability in marriage. After all, cows were the hallmark of bride wealth; the best mark of bride price paid to bride's family to summate marriage in the Luo community. The poor without cows had to be either assisted by their relatives and other generous neighbours or go without marrying altogether. It was believed that while walking the cows to a prospective wife's home, a young man who whipped the cows with the twig from the mwanda tree was assured that the woman would never leave his home whatever the challenges and difficulties in their marriage life (Odhiambo et al). Marriage was a status symbol of success in life. The loch tree signified that the woman would remain pegged or tethered to her marriage throughout her life in her matrimonial home. In the unlikely event of a marriage breakdown, the cows would be returned accordingly depending on whether children were born of the marriage or not, and the gender of the issues (children) thereof. But it was a big shame and embarrassment to be deserted by a wife for lack of cows. A woman, believed to have been exchanged for the cows, was herself a symbol of stability, continuity and prosperity in the family unit, like the scion of the mwanda tree.

➤ **Omuonyo Le** is a big fig tree located right in the middle of Got Ramogi. The mythology of the area has it that this fig tree swallowed many axes (*ledhi*, plural of *le*) and machetes (*bete/ bede*, plural of *beti*) of those who attempted to cut it down.

➤ **Dala** is believed to have been the first homestead of Ramogi Ajwang' as he and his people settled on the hill from Bahr-El-Ghazal province in South Sudan through Uganda. Historians and anthropologists seem to agree that Dala hembko was established in [1425](#) A.D.

Dala is significant to the Luos because it is believed to have been the first point the community settled in Kenya before dispersing to other parts of Kavirondo Gulf (Nyanza) and Tanzania.

Dala appears as a vague outline of a house as one climbs higher up the hill. This hembko is sometimes referred to as *gunda*, the old homestead.

Recently some investors put up four huts at **dala** each representing the four Luo counties of Migori, Homa Bay, Kisumu and Siaya.

➤ **Lwanda Asumbi** is the shrine at Got Ramogi where sacrifices were made during such unbearable calamities and disasters as referred to in local parlance as *dera*. *Dera* included extreme and prolonged drought, great famines (for example, *kech piende*), locust invasion (*dede*), foreign attack (like the Majoni of the World War II popularly known in Luo history as the War of Hitler (*Atila*)) and the outbreak of human diseases like *nundu*, the smallpox, or *opere* that killed a lot of their livestock. In Dholuo, *Lwanda* or *Luanda* means *Rock*.

Lwanda Asumbi shrine was important in helping the people to understand the cause of each disaster and what could be done to remedy the situation. The people of Got Ramogi worshipped and offered sacrifices and rituals at the shrine accordingly.

Lwanda Asumbi, according to Odhiambo et al (2020), is a rock considered as the rainmaking hembko of Got Ramogi. The rock has holes designated by the villagers as male and female, each with a lid to cover the "genitals", as it were. In times of drought, the elders would sacrifice a white he-goat and a brown cockerel. They would slaughter, roast and eat the animals at the shrine. "The blood of the goat and cockerel was then poured into the male and female holes".

Alcohol was also poured into both holes. Song and dance were performed in praise of the two stone lids that covered the male and female holes (Odhiambo et al, 2020).

The animals used as sacrificial offerings had to be without any blemish lest they be rejected by the spirits. The he-goat had to be completely white, and the cockerel had to be brown (Odhiambo et al, 2020). Both animals, spotless, had to be domestic animals possessed by man; each of the male gender which underscores male chauvinism in a highly

patriarchal Luo society. A cockerel is a young domestic cock; not older than one year. After all, man was the head of the family unit, and had his obligation to offer security and provide for all the needs of his people. The Luo society believed in man's ability to influence weather conditions and either cause rain for the general good or drought for the destruction of the people through magic. Rain water symbolizes life and hope, prosperity and productivity. The male and female rainmaking holes signify the role played by both male and female genders in procreation and continuity.

A story is told of a Mr. Adams Okech, a primary school teacher from Alego, who turned mad after he took away the two lids covering the male and female holes of Lwanda Asumbi rainmaking rock. He had offended the divine powers. Although he took back the two lids and a he-goat to placate the spirits, Adam's sanity was never restored. He was punished for playing mischief and trying to rise above the spirits and the community, a very big abomination and sacrilege.

➤ **Lwanda Laure** is the zenith or highest point at Got Ramogi. Ramogi and his warriors used the pinnacle hembko to enhance the security of the people.

The shrine is very popular with worshippers who visit the peak of the hills for fasting and prayers.

From the vantage point of Lwanda Laure, Ramogi and his people would survey and spy all over the place for their safety. Visitors at the peak of the hills are today able to view as far away as the Budalangi plains in Busia County. From Lwanda Laure at the top of Ramogi Hill, visitors have a very good view of the vast Yala swamp with its waters pouring into the Lake Victoria.

According to Prof. Ogot Gilbert of the University of Nairobi, an expert in anthropology, the Luo chose to settle at Got Ramogi because of its unique nature. It provided a natural protection for the Luo from attacks by their external enemies such as the In front of Lwanda

Laure was the *limbo* (spying) tree, a vantage point from which enemies from Alego, Sakwa and Yimbo could be detected and repelled.

This shrine contains water in a rock crevice which is believed to be where Ramogi himself used to bathe. The shrine was also used as an arena where Ramogi held meetings with the wider community (Odhiambo et al, 2020). For

Ramogi, it was a very significant personal bathroom. For the wider community, it was the people's assembly or parliament (*duol*) where the village elders and leaders also met and communicated with their subjects. The Luo had a centralized system of governance known as *Ruothship* in which *Ker* or *Ruoth*, the Chief, was both the political and spiritual leader.

➤ **Lwanda Alego** is the deepest part of the forest which people hardly reach because of the fear of a huge serpent snake that dwells there. This shrine was Ramogi's relaxation and recreation centre. The shrine acquired its name from an old mzee called Alego who would sit on the rock and bask in the sun. When Ramogi Ajwang' arrived at Got Ramogi, Alego was forced to flee the hill. He had to pave way for Ramogi as his leader without any resistance. It is believed that a sacred spring flows under this rock which signifies the sanctity and purity of this favorite spot on the hill.

Lwanda Alego is another very mythical shrine. Its mystery is traced back in Luo folklore to Nyang'idia, Dimo's first wife. Yimbo where Got Ramogi exists was founded by Dimo. This is why the area is often referred to as Yimbo Kadimo.

The story goes that Nyang'idia died a very unhappy woman. ****WHY?**. After she died, she went into the Nam Lolwe and became a vengeful goddess of the lake. Often she would turn out as a turbulent storm known as nyakoi, overturning boats and killing the fishermen. And indeed that way, the lake consumed many souls before her spirits were placated.**

Sacrifices were later administered to Nyang'idia to humor her vengeance and wickedness. She accepted and changed her status from the turbulent whirlwind nyakoi to the big snake residing at and presiding over the hembko of Lwanda Alego. People never dare to go into the deep forest for fear of an encounter with the monster. Nyang'idia snake reminds one of the Omieri of Nyakach and the Kiboye of Gwassi hills.

Several hotels at Usenge Beach, however, named after Nyang'idia today bear testimony to this mythology and legend.

➤ **Dhiang' gi Nyaroya** is another very significant reminder of the hostility between the Luos and the original owners of the land, the Kalenjins (specifically the Kipsigis) whom they drove away from the hill.

This shrine is also referred to as **Kar-Dhiang'**, a very interesting site at Got Ramogi. Dhiang' gi nyaroya are rocks that resemble the shape of a cow (*dhiang'*) and a calf (*nyaroya*). It is believed it is here where Ramogi grazed and kept his animals.

The story goes that after the Luo had a truce (*ng'ado guok*) with **Jolang'o** (the Kipsigis), both parties resolved that they would thereafter live in peace and never attack or steal from one another. However, one day one evening after the cows had been milked and the homestead was in deep sleep, one of the Kipsigis warriors sneaked into the kraal to steal away the cow and its calf. It just could not happen after the ritual mutual agreement between the two communities had been „signed“. Consequently, both the cow and its young one turned into a shrine of ritual rocks.

Another version of the *dhiang' gi nyaroya* myth is that one evening after the animals had returned from the grazing fields, a cow and its calf bolted away through the main gate out of the compound. Ramogi instructed his sons to leave them alone for a search the following day only to discover that they had turned into monuments of stone (Odhambo et al, 2020).

Whether they were being stolen by a **Lang'o** warrior, or the two animals were just excitedly running out of the compound, one thing stands: the happening took place late in the evening, at nightfall. Their running out of the compound at dusk was a sign of bad omen. It was a rebellion against the established order of events. By turning from a living cow and a calf into petrified ritual rocks, the spirits of the ancestors had made a statement about stubbornness and unruliness: the monuments symbolized the reward for tough headedness. The shrine became “a sanctuary for herbs and concoctions for cows that showed signs of trouble or the potential of becoming uncontrollable” (Odhambo et al, 2020).

III. CONCLUSION

The offering of sacrifices at the various alters at Got Ramogi hembko signifies man's helplessness in the face of nature and the supernatural phenomena. The Luo resorted to consulting the supernatural forces to intercede for their wellness. Sacrifices were a major way of communicating with their God and ancestors in the spiritual realm. The offerings were intended to appease or propitiate the supernatural forces by creating a strong bond between the people and the divine

world.

The search was able to identify nine (9) cultural shrines or hembko in Dholuo. Each of these shrines had unique name and function in the cultural and spiritual heritage of the people. The Luo offered spotless animal rituals to their God Nyasaye to propitiate or placate the supernatural world for continued prosperity and posterity. Further research should be conducted on Ramogi Hill to discover even more unearthed shrines.

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